



# OBERLIN PERFECTIONISM

## ARTICLE ONE

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## OBERLIN PERFECTIONISM

### I. THE MEN AND THE BEGINNINGS.

Oberlin College<sup>1</sup> had its origin in what seemed a wild dream that formed itself in 1832 in the mind of John J. Shipherd, home-missionary pastor of the little Presbyterian church in the village of Elyria, Ohio. As the scheme floated before his imagination, it was perhaps not very dissimilar to one of those communistic enterprises which were springing up throughout the country in the wake of the excitement aroused by Robert Owen. To that extent Shipherd may be accounted a brother spirit to John H. Noyes. But he had not the courage of conviction, to call it by no harsher name, which drove Noyes on in his reckless course. When he came to draw up the Oberlin "Covenant," he faltered. He provided only that "we will hold and manage our estates personally, but pledge as perfect a community of interest as though we held a community of property." By so narrow a margin Oberlin appears to have escaped becoming a decent Oneida Community: or rather, we should say, by so narrow a margin Oberlin appears to have escaped the early end which has befallen all communistic enterprises which wish to be decent; for communism and decency cannot exist together.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from this one point, the persistency of Shipherd's

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<sup>1</sup> Compare: J. H. Fairchild, *Oberlin, Its Origin, Progress and Results*, 1871, and *Oberlin, the Colony and the College*, 1883; W. G. Ballantyne, *Oberlin Jubilee, 1833-1883*, 1884; D. L. Leonard, *The Story of Oberlin*, 1898.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. D. L. Leonard, *The Story of Oberlin*, 1898, pp. 87 ff. for some account of Shipherd's communistic leaning.

purpose and the energy of his will were incapable of faltering. By the end of 1833, he had some nine square miles of virgin forest in hand; the beginnings of a colony already settled on it, pledged to high thinking and hard living (not only no alcohol or tobacco, but also no coffee, no tea, no condiments); a large boarding-school building erected; efficient teachers at work in it, and a body of pupils, which numbered forty-four by the end of the session, gathered at their feet. There was of course only an "Academy" at first. But Shipherd's plan embraced also from the beginning a "College" and a "Theological Seminary"; and already early in 1834, there was a Board of Trustees in being, operating under a charter, couched in broad terms, which spoke of an "Oberlin Collegiate Institute." And by the autumn of that year there was a freshman class ready to enter at the opening of the next session (in the spring) "the collegiate department" of this Institute. Summer was term-time at Oberlin, winter vacation. Late in November, accordingly, Shipherd started out, armed with a commission from the Board of Trustees to obtain the means to make the step forward now become necessary. What he sought was money and a President. But like Saul, seeking the asses, he found much that he was not looking for. He found a whole Theological Seminary,—President, professors, pupils and endowment—all complete; and he brought it all back with him to Oberlin in the spring of 1835.

Shipherd always contended that he was supernaturally guided in this quest. And Asa Mahan, the President whom he found, fully agreed with him. Up to the end of his long life, Mahan constantly insisted that he was supernaturally called to the Presidency of Oberlin College, not in the providential sense in which this phrase is ordinarily employed, but with as immediate a supernaturalism as that with which Saul or David was designated king over Israel.<sup>3</sup> Shipherd, having money and a President to find, naturally should have gone east where money and Presidents were to be found.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Asa Mahan, *Autobiography*, 1881, p. 190.

But he discovered himself going south instead. "An irresistible impression" drove him without any clear intelligence justifying his action, in the wrong direction. So he reached Cincinnati instead of New York, and found—Mahan; who, everybody in Cincinnati told him, was the very person he was seeking. He thought so too; and with the more confidence that he could see now that he had been divinely guided to him. Mahan had a whole Theological Seminary ready for removal to Oberlin. There had been an abolitionist organization among the students of Lane Theological Seminary, which the Trustees of that Institution had endeavored to suppress. The result was that the students had withdrawn from the Seminary, practically in a body; and, housed near by, were endeavoring to continue their theological education independently, with only the aid of John Morgan, who had been tutor in the preparatory department at Lane and had withdrawn with the students. Mahan had been the single member of the Board of Trustees who had taken the students' part; and he now proposed that they, with Morgan, should go with him to Oberlin, thus completing at a stroke the three-storied structure proposed for that institution.

Excited by these bewildering occurrences, Shipherd, taking Mahan with him, proceeded east to complete his mission. He now, however, no longer sought money and a President, but money and a Professor of Theology. The office was offered on the way to Theodore G. Weld, the young abolitionist agitator, who had had much to do with the students' revolt at Lane and who was their idol. He pointed them rather to Charles G. Finney; and to Finney, then pastor of the Broadway Tabernacle Congregationalist Church, New York, accordingly they went. They found him depressed in body and spirit, with a feeling that the bow of his strength was broken and his evangelistic days were over;<sup>4</sup> and quite ready to listen to their proposal if only the

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<sup>4</sup> Preface to his *Sermons on Important Subjects* (1834) 1836, p. iv: "My health has been such as to render it probable that I shall never



necessary financial provision could be made. This was managed with the help of his friend, Arthur Tappan, who was always ready to multiply good works. One condition, however, was made by all—Tappan and Finney and Mahan and the Lane students alike. There was to be no color line drawn at Oberlin. The whole enterprise was near to wrecking on this condition. It was only with the greatest difficulty and in the end by a majority of only one vote, and that on an ambiguously worded resolution, that the Trustees were brought to comply with it. It was however thus complied with; and so Shipherd was able to bring his Theological Seminary to Oberlin in the spring of 1835.

The end of woes, however, was not yet. The New York backers of the enterprise failed; and it found itself plunged into the greatest financial straits. The students who had come from Lane proved a little difficult—some of them perhaps quite impossible—as from their antecedents it was to be anticipated they would.<sup>5</sup> His colleagues found Mahan himself something more than a little difficult.<sup>6</sup> Finney

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be able to labor as an evangelist again." Preface to his *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (1835), 2d ed. 1835, p. iii: "I am now a Pastor, and have not sufficient health to labor as an Evangelist."

<sup>5</sup> When Asa Mahan, *Autobiography*, p. 231, speaks of the lugubrious tone of their Christianity, some discount may properly be made on account of his natural zeal against a "miserable-sinner Christianity." Though they were "from among the brightest converts" of the great revivals, he says, "their common experience was represented in the words: 'Where is the blessedness I knew, when first I saw the Lord?'" Speaking of their tone of mind while still at Lane (pp. 239 ff.), he says: "Several of the most talented among them" refused to go to church saying they could "derive no benefit from the discourses of Dr. Beecher or any other pastor in the city." "They understood the whole subject." They did go to chapel, "and there listened to one of the feeblest preachers I ever knew," and openly said that feeble as they were, his sermons were as useful to them as any others in the city could be. "Of those young men," he remarks, "every one, so far as I could learn, afterwards made shipwreck of the faith. Only one or two of them entered the ministry at all, and they soon left it, under the influence of some of the absurdities that then obtained."

<sup>6</sup> D. L. Leonard, *The Story of Oberlin*, 1898, p. 40: "Certain faults and infirmities of his wrought not a little damage." Again, p. 244 f.: "His spirit was radical, positive and aggressive, and while he made

bristled with eccentricities.<sup>7</sup> Fads were exaggerated into fanaticisms, foibles into gospels. There were some who, worn out with the wrangle, left—"in a very unhappy frame," as the historian says.<sup>8</sup> Most stayed on, and rasped along. Meanwhile Finney and Mahan, with the valuable assistance of John Morgan and Henry Cowles—who completed the theological faculty—were preaching, with the greatest power and effect, the duty, the privilege, the possibility of a holy walk. The circumstances in which they found themselves imposed this particular topic upon them as, in a very distinct sense, their peculiar message; and they delivered it with great elaboration and persistency. As they pressed on in their more and more intensified exhortations, it came about that they were preaching just the duty and attainability of a life of perfect holiness, though they themselves had not faced the fact.

It required to be forced on their recognition by pressure from without. This came in the summer and autumn of 1836 as the second year of the Theological Seminary was drawing to a close. Under the exhortations of their preceptors the students perceived that precisely what was required of them was perfection. They put the question; and at length—though not until the ensuing winter—received the affirmative answer. We are assisting here at the birth of Oberlin Perfectionism. Once born, it proved a very vigorous and very exacting child. Its exposition and de-

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many warm friends and admirers, others not a few were stirred to disfavor and antagonism. . . . Certain serious defects attended his career, which in particular his associates in the faculty found it increasingly difficult to endure. After long forbearance and as a last resort it was determined to draw up a paper setting forth the facts in the case, to be signed by all and presented to the Trustees."

<sup>7</sup> For example, Leonard, as cited, p. 35: "With the advent of Mr. Finney it began to be taught that a strict Graham diet was the only one either hygienic or truly Christian, while meat and all condiments were to be eschewed." Compare pp. 209 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Leonard, as cited, pp. 35, 261, 442. J. P. Cowles is alluded to, whose views, we are told, "were at some points so opposed to those of his associates, and who felt constrained to speak and act just as he felt, that his resignation was requested." He left Oberlin in 1839.

fence absorbed a very large part of the energies of the staff of theological instructors. It was Mahan who took the lead and made himself first and last its chief expounder. Finney, however, was first on the field. Spending the winter of 1836-1837 in New York, as was his custom during his early years at Oberlin, and preaching there a series of *Lectures to Professing Christians*—his new engrossment—he preached two of them on "Christian Perfection," the first public proclamation of Oberlin Perfectionism. A semi-monthly newspaper—*The Oberlin Evangelist*—the first number of which appeared on the first of January, 1839, was established under the editorship of Henry Cowles, for the main purpose of propagating the new doctrine. In it there were at once printed certain articles on the all-absorbing topic, out of which books by Finney, Mahan and Cowles were soon gathered together.<sup>9</sup> Wherever Oberlin was heard of, it was Oberlin Perfectionism which was heard of first.<sup>10</sup>

The Oberlin Professors, we see, did not bring perfectionism to Oberlin. They brought an ultraistic temper<sup>11</sup> and the "New Divinity." And the "New Divinity," here too, as it had previously done in Central and Western New York, begot perfectionism out of its own loins. Oberlin was only an extension of Western New York into the wilds of Northern Ohio, and it repeated in its religious history, as it reproduced in its mental quality, the characteristic

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<sup>9</sup> An address of Mahan's published in the first number, was utilized as the core of a small book by him, called *Christian Perfection* (early in 1839), which at once became the chief vehicle of the doctrine.

<sup>10</sup> Asa Mahan, *Autobiography*, p. 261: "The college early became, principally through its President and Professor of Theology, the visible representative of the doctrine of the Higher Life."

<sup>11</sup> What was understood at the time by the phrase "religious ultraism," then very current, may be conveniently read in an admirable printed sermon of W. B. Sprague's bearing that title (Albany, 1835). Cf. also D. R. Goodwin, "On Religious Ultraism," in *The Literary and Theological Review*, vol. III, 1836, pp. 56-66, completed by "Radical Opinions," same journal, pp. 253-265.



features of its stock. John Morgan<sup>12</sup> and Henry Cowles,<sup>13</sup> were not Western New York men. But they had both fallen under influences of the same general character, the one in contact with Lyman Beecher at Cincinnati, the other under the instruction of N. W. Taylor at Yale; and had received the same stamp. The situation was dominated in any case, however, by Finney and Mahan, both Western New York men, both "New Divinity" men, and both men of aggressive spirit and radical temper. Their previous lives, though springing out of the same soil, had run on very different lines, and it is rather remarkable to see them converge at Oberlin in a common end.

The details of Finney's early life which are current seem to rest altogether on his own recollections. He does not profess that these were complete, and there is some reason to suspect that they were not always altogether accurate. The main facts which he gives us<sup>14</sup> are that he was born in Warren, Litchfield Co., Connecticut, August 29, 1792; that two years afterwards the family removed to Brothertown, Oneida Co., New York; whence, however, while Finney was still so young a child that he retained no recollection of it, they were compelled, by the settlement of certain tribes of Indians there, to move to Hanover (subsequently renamed Kirkland), then a part of the large township of Paris, in the same county. There the boy grew up and went to school, until he was about sixteen years of age (Finney says he does not remember the exact date), when the family moved again,—to Henderson, Jefferson Co., New York, a

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<sup>12</sup> Born at Cork, Ireland, 1802; graduated at Williams College, 1826; taught at New York: Preparatory School Teacher at Lane. Cf. Calvin Durfee, *Williams Biographical Annals*, 1871, p. 429.

<sup>13</sup> Born at Norfolk, Connecticut, 1803; graduated at Yale College, 1826, and Divinity School, 1829; pastor for seven years in Northern Ohio. Cf. D. L. Leonard, *The Story of Oberlin*, pp. 279 ff.; *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopaedia*, and *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, *sub nom.*

<sup>14</sup> *Memoirs of Rev. Charles G. Finney, written by Himself*, 1876, pp. 4 ff.; P. H. Fowler, *Historical Sketch of Presbyterianism within the Bounds of the Synod of Central New York*, 1877, p. 258.

hamlet a little south of Sackett's Harbor. At this new home he taught school for something like four years. Then, when he was "about twenty years old," or "soon after he was twenty years of age," he went back to his ancestral home, Warren, Connecticut, and spent some four years there and in New Jersey, in study and teaching. Returning thence to his parents, he soon afterward entered the law-office of Benjamin Wright at Adams, New York, and began the study of law. This, he says, was in 1818.

It is a little difficult to form a vivid picture of the actual life of the boy within this framework. It was a raw frontier life; and there seem to have been few cultural and no religious ameliorations afforded him by his home associations. There may be some reason to believe that his father, like Lyman Beecher's, pursued the trade of a blacksmith;<sup>15</sup> and it is certain that the household, like that in which Beecher was bred, was without church connections.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Finney not only represents the household as without religion, but broadens out the representation until the impression is conveyed that no "religious privileges were accessible to him in the community." This is a, perhaps not unnatural, exaggeration. Looking back upon his youth, barren of religious impressions, he transferred to his surroundings much that belonged only to himself, and thus transmuted his fault into his misfortune. Even in the frontier districts in which he lived not only Christian people but Christian churches could be found by those who desired to be associated with them; and not only unlettered itinerants and absurd exhorters but also learned ministers and faithful pastors could be met with by those who sought

<sup>15</sup> David W. Bartlett, in the sketch of Finney in his *Modern Agitators, or Pen-Portraits of Living American Reformers*, 1855, p. 152, says that as a boy Finney "found considerable time to wield the sledge at his father's anvil," taking thus "his first lesson in moulding the hot iron to a desired shape." His authority for the statement is not given.

<sup>16</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 4: "My parents were neither of them professors of religion, and I believe among our neighbors there were very few religious people." Compare Lyman Beecher's *Autobiography*, edited by Charles Beecher, vol. I, p. 78.

them out. The particular region in which Finney's boyhood was spent was indeed peculiarly well supplied with opportunities for religious culture. Clinton was but a short two-miles away, and Clinton was already a center of religious influence. There seems also to have been an organized religious society in his own hamlet with so excellent a minister as P. V. Bogue at the head of it.<sup>17</sup> The difficulty with Finney's early religious training was not that he lacked opportunity but that he lacked desire for it.

Things naturally were different when the family left this favored region (about 1808) and made a new home for itself in the backwoods of Jefferson County. There was

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<sup>17</sup> See the "Journal of the Rev. John Taylor, on a Mission through the Mohawk and Black River Country, in the year 1802," printed in E. B. O'Callaghan, *The Documentary History of the State of New York*, vol. II, 1850, p. 1112. "Most of the churches in this part of the world are on the presbyterian plan. The church at Clinton, is, however, congregational. Mr. Norton has a church containing 240 members and this people is considered to be the most harmonious, regular, and pious of any in the northern part of the State of New York. In this town, or rather parish, is an academy, which is in a flourishing state. A Mr. Porter, an excellent character, and a preacher, is precentor. They have one usher, and about 60 scholars. This institution promises fair to be of great service to this part of the country. Piety is very much encouraged in it and some young gentlemen have become preachers who have received education in it. There are in the town a few Universalists, and one small Baptist church, but not a sufficient number to have any influence. In the Society of Paris, of which Clinton is a part, Mr. Steele is pastor; he is said to be a good and reputable man—he has a respectable congregation. In Hanover, a society of Paris, Mr. Bogue is Pastor." Cf. Fowler, as cited, p. 180. The church at Clinton was organized in 1791 by Jonathan Edwards the younger; Asahel Strong Norton was installed pastor of it in 1793 "and remained there for forty years, upheld by grace and the support of an unwavering faithfulness, an unerring judgment, an unspoiled character, and a blameless life" (Fowler, p. 90). For a biographical sketch of Bogue see Fowler, pp. 464, f. After a successful ministry at Winchester, Conn. (from 1791), he was employed in New York by the Missionary Society of Connecticut (from 1798), "and then accepted a call to Hanover, (now Kirkland) Oneida County, where he was equally successful for a number of years, and after that took charge of a church at Vernon Center." This appears to extend Bogue's pastorate at Kirkland through most of Finney's residence there.



practically no settled ministry at that time in this region;<sup>18</sup> and the young school-teacher passed some four years here without easy access to the stated means of grace. Returning thence to civilization and religious privileges he was able to sit, however, Sabbath after Sabbath, in the choir-gallery of good Peter Starr's church at Warren, Connecticut, unmoved to any spiritual response by his pastor's faithful preaching.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile changes were taking place in Jefferson County. A revival had swept through that region in 1815.<sup>20</sup> Settled churches were being established. A Presbyterian church at Sackett's Harbor which in 1816 had called to its pastorate Edward Finley Snowden, a man of the highest quality, was formally organized in the early months of 1817.<sup>21</sup> A Congregationalist Church, soon to become Presbyterian, was organized at Adams.<sup>22</sup> When Finney returned to his father's house in 1816, or somewhat later, it was no longer to a community in which the stated means of grace were inaccessible, and no longer to a household to which the grace of God was a stranger. A brother

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<sup>18</sup> Fowler, as cited, p. 180: "That region also suffered long for the want of means of grace. A minister who visited it in 1816, relates: 'To the north as far as the St. Lawrence and east to Champlain, there are probably not six gospel ministers'—an extent of country including the quarter of the State of New York. . . . And a little later, a missionary writes, 'we could not hear of any minister in the St. Lawrence country, and there are very few on the Black River.'"

<sup>19</sup> *Memoirs*, pp. 6 f.: G. Frederick Wright, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 1891, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Fowler, p. 180.

<sup>21</sup> For biographical notice of Snowden, see Fowler, pp. 647 f., and J. F. Hageman, *History of Princeton and its Institutions*, 1879, vol. ii, p. 94 ff. Cf. W. B. Sprague, *Annals*, vol. iii, p. 341. He was dismissed by the Presbytery of Oneida, to take charge of the church at Sackett's Harbor in 1816 but the formal organization of the church did not take place until Feb. 17, 1817.

<sup>22</sup> In the *Minutes* of the Presbyterian General Asssmbly for 1819 these two churches stand side by side in the Presbytery of St. Lawrence: Sackett's Harbour, Samuel F. Snowden, and Adams North Congregational Church, Edward W. Rosseter. We quote from the *Minutes* of 1819, since there are no statistical tables in those of the immediately preceding years.



had given himself to God during his absence.<sup>23</sup> If he himself still knew nothing of the grace of God, that could only be because he did not wish to know anything of it. We are glad to be told that he was not in any sense vicious:<sup>24</sup> he was, however, in every sense godless. It was not that he had no contact with religion. If he had not a praying mother, he had a praying sweetheart who did not cease to bear him on her heart before God;<sup>25</sup> and it is obvious from his own narrative that he was repeatedly more or less affected by the religious appeal. If he did not know God it was because he refused to have God in his knowledge. He was not ignorant of Christianity; he was, as a contemporary puts it "a great opposer of the Church before his conversion."<sup>26</sup> Or, as the historian phrases it, "he was without godliness and with the spirit of a sceptic and scoffer."<sup>27</sup>

When Finney, yielding to the persuasions of his invalid mother who wished him to remain near her, gave up his

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<sup>23</sup> In his *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, Ed. of 1851, p. 429, Finney relates this incident: "I well recollect, when far from home, and while an impenitent sinner, I received a letter from my youngest brother, informing me that he was converted to God. He, if he was converted, was, as I supposed, the first and only member of the family who then had a hope of salvation. I was at the time, and both before and after, one of the most careless of sinners, and yet on receiving this intelligence, I actually wept for joy and gratitude that one of so prayerless a family was likely to be saved."

<sup>24</sup> Hiram Mead, *The Congregational Quarterly*, January 1877, p. 3: "It is a remarkable fact, which he has not thought worthy of notice, that in spite of his lack of religious advantages, he never became reckless or vicious. As a young man, he was spirited, and, no doubt, sometimes rough and hilarious; but, considering his associations, he was exceptionally conscientious and high-minded."

<sup>25</sup> G. F. Wright, as cited, p. 37, tells us that Finney's sweetheart, (her home was at Whitestown, only a few miles from Kirkland) "had been deeply interested in praying for Finney's conversion in the days of his impenitence."

<sup>26</sup> E. H. Snowden in the *Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine*, May 1838, p. 236. Snowden (son of S. F. Snowden, mentioned above) had been a pastor at Brownsville where he says both Finney and Burchard had labored—disastrously to the church. Cf. Finney's *Memoirs*, p. 111ff.

<sup>27</sup> D. L. Leonard, *Story of Oberlin*, p. 128.

purpose of further pursuing his literary education, and entered the law-office of Benjamin Wright (afterwards Wright and Wardwell) at Adams, in 1818 (he was then twenty-six years old), he seemed to have come to his own. He was peculiarly endowed for the work of an advocate, and we are not surprised to learn that he loved his profession and was successful in its practice from the very first. An indelible impression was left upon his mind by his legal studies, and his habits of thought and modes of public speech were fixed for life during the four short years of his practice at the bar. He was not to be left, however, to the peaceful prosecution of his chosen profession. He was already suffering under a certain amount of religious uneasiness; and the circumstances of his life in Adams did not permit him to escape from the daily appeal of religion to him. Religion had always been within his reach—the difference was only comparative. “Up to this time,”<sup>28</sup> he says, “I had never enjoyed *what might be called* religious privileges”: “I had never lived in a praying community *except* during the period when I was attending the high school in New England”: “At Adams, for the first time, I sat *statedly, for a length of time*, under an educated ministry:” “I had never, until this time, lived where I could attend a *stated* prayermeeting.” The qualifications, which have been thrown up to attention by italicizing them, deserve the most marked emphasis. It is only by regarding them that we obtain a view of the true state of the case. What happened to Finney at Adams was that he was no longer permitted to neglect religion. The young pastor of the Presbyterian church there, George W. Gale, was a man of force and a pastor of parts. He never permitted this fine young lawyer, who was scoffing at religion, but was clearly not easy in his mind about it, to escape beyond its influence. He made him leader of the choir and so secured his constant attendance at the church. He was in the habit, Finney naïvely says, “of dropping in at our office frequently and seemed anxious to know what impression

<sup>28</sup> *Memoirs*, pp. 6 ff.

his sermons had made on my mind,"—apparently not dreaming that that was not vanity on Gale's part, but good pastoral work. Finney found himself going not merely to church but to prayer-meeting. He says in his old age that he does not recollect having ever attended a prayer-meeting before: and now he wished to do so, partly from curiosity, and partly from an uneasiness of mind on the subject which he could not well define.<sup>29</sup> He got a Bible, the first he had ever owned; and took to reading it, at first under cover of interest in Biblical law, but soon with deeper concern. He did not easily yield; he was a harsh critic of his pastor's sermons and of the prayers of Christians. But Gale's zeal did not flag; and we may be sure he saw clearly enough the signs of the coming end.

Precisely how the end came, we are not quite sure. Finney tells us that he "was brought face to face with the question whether he would accept Christ."<sup>30</sup> On a Sabbath evening in the autumn of 1821, he says, "I made up my mind that I would settle the question of my soul's salvation at once."<sup>31</sup> So closely is his account confined to his own subjective experiences that the reader is tempted to suppose that there were no objective occurrences by which they were brought about. In point of fact Finney's conversion took place in a great revival; and it was currently supposed that his final step was the result of the exhortations of Jedediah Burchard.<sup>32</sup> Ever since his return to the West he had been

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<sup>29</sup> Tract on *Prevailing Prayer*.

<sup>30</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 11.

<sup>31</sup> P. 12.

<sup>32</sup> For example, Joseph I. Foot (*Literary and Theological Review*, March, 1828, p. 70) when speaking of the fanatical teaching of John Truair, continues: "Over the field where Truair had recently sown the seeds, the Rev. J. Burchard soon passed, whose subsequent labors in the vicinity are said to have brought forth the Rev. C. G. Finney." A more favorable opinion of Truair is expressed by Fowler, as cited, pp. 644 ff., and as favorable an account of Burchard as could be given may be found in the same work, pp. 278 ff. Burchard was at the time still a layman, resident at Sackett's Harbor, and zealously holding lay services there and at Adams.



living in the presence of revival conditions. The revival of 1815 already mentioned as sweeping over this region, had been followed by others without intermission. Sixty-five converts were added to the little church at Adams in 1819, at the opening of Gale's ministry there. Seventy were added to the church at Sackett's Harbor in 1820. In 1821 the whole region was stirred to its depths; from eight hundred to a thousand converts were reported from Jefferson County—no fewer than seventy or eighty from Finney's home hamlet, Henderson. In Adams itself one of the churches received forty-four new members and the other sixty or seventy.<sup>33</sup> It was in these stirring scenes that Finney's conversion took place. He gives us a very detailed account of his experiences in it.<sup>34</sup> The most notable feature of these experiences is their supernaturalism; a supernaturalism not wholly in keeping with his strenuous subsequent insistence on the "make yourself a new heart" of the "New Divinity"; there is imbedded in them a most poignant experience of express inability.<sup>35</sup> The account of them, written in his old age, is more or less adjusted to his subsequent modes of thought,<sup>36</sup> and closes with a couple of odd paragraphs in which he "improves" his conversion by rep-

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<sup>33</sup> Fowler, as cited, p. 190, drawing the details from *The Utica Christian Repository*, of the time. The general fact is safeguarded by the report of the Presbytery of St. Lawrence itself, which mentions revivals as occurring at Watertown, Sackett's Harbor, Adams, first and second, Lorraine, and Rodman.

<sup>34</sup> *Memoirs*, chapter 2.

<sup>35</sup> Lyman H. Atwater, *The Presbyterian Quarterly and Princeton Review*, Oct. 1876, p. 706 remarks on this, while G. F. Wright, p. 9 seeks to explain it away.

<sup>36</sup> G. F. Wright, as cited, p. 6, speaking of interpreting Finney's conversion says: "The difficulty of such an interpretation is also somewhat increased by the fact that, in the *Memoirs* by himself, Finney has accompanied his narrative by numerous doctrinal disquisitions, in which those familiar with the controversies of the time readily detect the results of subsequent years of reflection interjecting their later theology in the narrative of early experience." "It is extremely improbable," he declares, "that the theological system defended in his later life burst upon his mind at the outset in such complete form as his own narrative would imply."



resenting it as impressing then and there indelibly on his mind his later doctrines of justification *in foro conscientiae* rather than *in foro Dei*, and of its issue in sinlessness. "I could not feel a sense of guilt or condemnation, by any effort that I could make; my sins were gone; and I do not think I felt any more sense of guilt than if I had never sinned. . . . I felt myself justified by faith; and, so far as I could see, I was in a state in which I did not sin. Instead of feeling that I was sinning all the time, my heart was so full of love that it overflowed—I could not feel that I was sinning against God, nor could I recover the least sense of guilt for my past sins."<sup>37</sup> He adds: "Of this experience I said nothing that I recollect, at the time, to anybody; that is, of this experience of justification."

Finney emerged from his conversion a new man: the "sceptic and scoffer" had become the believer and zealous propagandist. His devotion to the legal profession fell away at once with his old man; he assumed immediately the new profession of bringing men to Christ. A judicial case on which he was engaged came up for trial the morning after his conversion. "I have a retainer from the Lord Jesus Christ to plead His cause and I cannot plead yours," he said to his astonished client. And at once he went out on the streets to compel them to come in. It is not possible to obtain a connected view of his activities during the two years between the outstanding dates of his conversion in the autumn of 1821 and his licensure by the Presbytery of St. Lawrence on Dec. 30, 1823. His biographer says that "about as much mystery hangs over the first year and a half of Finney's life subsequent to his conversion as that which shrouds the corresponding period of the apostle Paul's renewed life."<sup>38</sup> The comparison, to be sure, is not very apt; but it is true that although we know many details of Finney's activities during this period and its general character is clear, our knowledge of it remains confused.

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<sup>37</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 23; cf. 18.

<sup>38</sup> G. F. Wright, as cited, p. 19.

The account Finney gives of himself after his conversion loses itself in unordered details; and his dates give us no guidance, being all wrong. He makes it perfectly plain, however, that he at once gave himself to active Christian work, which centered in the church at Adams, but reached out also at least to his old home at Henderson; there he had the happiness of bringing his parents to Christ. From another account,<sup>39</sup> we learn that he "actively engaged in the same schoolhouse labors" which were being carried on by Jedediah Burchard, as a layworker, from his center at Sackett's Harbor.

In the midst of these activities, he was taken under the care of Presbytery of St. Lawrence with a view to the gospel ministry, at a meeting held at Adams, June 25, 1823, and was "directed to pursue his studies under the direction of Rev. Messrs. Gale and Boardman."<sup>40</sup> It would not have been easy to find better men for this service.<sup>41</sup> They were both men of sufficient learning, great force of character, and skill in dealing with men. The whole work apparently, however, fell into the hands of Gale, who was also Finney's pastor,<sup>42</sup> and with whom he was already in consultation. There was no mental sympathy between the two young men—Gale was now in his thirty-fourth year and Finney in his thirty-first: each was conscious of native power, and was tenacious of his opinions; and the so-called instruction appears to have degenerated into a constant wrangle. Finney brought to Gale the unordered Pelagianism of the man in the street, strengthened and sharpened by the habits

<sup>39</sup> Fowler, as cited, p. 190.

<sup>40</sup> Fowler, p. 258; G. F. Wright, p. 20.

<sup>41</sup> There are biographical sketches of both in Alfred Nevin's *Encyclopaedia of the Presbyterian Church*, 1834, *sub nomm.*, and in Fowler, as cited, pp. 190, 467 and 552 respectively. For Gale see also Martha F. Webster, *Seventy-five Significant Years; The Story of Knox College, 1837-1912, 1912*, pp. 1 ff.

<sup>42</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 46: "They appointed my pastor to superintend my studies." On p. 140 accordingly he calls Gale simply, "my theological teacher," and on p. 153, with meticulous care, explains that Gale had "by direction of the Presbytery attended somewhat to my theological studies."

of thought picked up in the law-courts; and he used Gale merely as an anvil on which to beat his own views into shape. His attitude at first was one of mere denial; he rejected with decision, not to say violence, the evangelical system which Gale sought to inculcate. The positive construction naturally came more slowly. "My views took on a positive type but slowly. At first I found myself unable to receive his peculiar views; and then gradually formed views of my own in opposition to them, which appeared to me to be unequivocally taught in the Bible."<sup>43</sup> We do not know when his views were fully formed. When they were, they had run into the mold of the "New Divinity" in the special form in which it was being taught at the moment in New Haven. There are some who think this result purely accidental: Finney, a great original thinker, reproduced for himself without any connection with him whatever, what N. W. Taylor was teaching with such revolutionary effect in New Haven.<sup>44</sup> So far as the fundamental principle and general substance of his thought are concerned no doubt this is the true account to give of its origin. Pelagianism, unfortunately, does not wait to be imported from New Haven, and does not require inculcating—it is the instinctive thought of the natural man. But Finney's thought ran not merely into the general mold of Pelagianism, but into the special mold of the particular mode of stating Pelagianism which had been worked out by N. W. Taylor. The historian of New England Theology feels compelled therefore to say that "independent as it was, and vigorously as its author had impressed upon it the marks of his own pronounced individuality," Finney's theology "may be dismissed in the one word 'Taylorism.'"<sup>45</sup> There were "vari-

<sup>43</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 54.

<sup>44</sup> For example, A. T. Swing, *The Bibliotheca Sacra*, July 1900, 465: "What in New England had been gradually evolved from Old Calvinism through two generations of theological reformers was substantially wrought out independently of them by President Finney's rational revolt (*Memoirs*, pp. 7, 42-60), which was so closely connected with his conversion as to be practically inseparable from it."

<sup>45</sup> Frank H. Foster, *A Genetic History of New England Theology*, 1907, p. 467.



ous underground currents," he says,<sup>46</sup> which "set from New Haven westward, and some of them bore theological ideas into the region where Finney was." We do not need, however, to raise question as to the channels of communication by which Taylorism was brought to Finney. Intercourse between Connecticut and Western New York was constant; Finney received part of his education in Connecticut and his was the common case; all the ministers of his acquaintance were trained in the east and came from the east and maintained connection with the east; and Taylorism was, at the moment, the vogue. What we need more particularly to ask ourselves is only, how far at this early date Finney's views had crystallized into distinctly Taylorite shape. According to his own representation in his *Memoirs* they had already done so, at least in general, at the opening of his ministry; and certainly we cannot trace any other type of teaching in any account we have of his work. We know no other Finney than the Taylorite Finney.

On the 30th of December 1823, only six months after he had been taken under the care of the Presbytery, Finney was licensed to preach the Gospel at a meeting of the Presbytery of St. Lawrence held at Adams. He tells us that the Presbytery dealt gently with him and avoided raising questions on which he differed from it. Having now become a minister, he entered at once upon his ministerial labors in the northern part of Jefferson County—Evans Mills and Antwerp—as a missionary in the employment of the Female Missionary Society of the Western District of New York. As such a man naturally would be, he was successful in his labors from the start. He was ordained on his field, July 1, 1824, at a meeting of the Presbytery at Evans Mills; and seems to have contemplated settling at that place in a permanent pastorate. He was drawn off, however, into further evangelistic labors, and prosecuted them unbrokenly in Jefferson and St. Lawrence counties up to the autumn of 1825. During these two years he

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<sup>46</sup> P. 453.



lived the ordinary life of a frontier missionary, witnessing the same kinds of incidents—some of them bizarre enough—making the common experiences, but reaping more than ordinarily rich a harvest. According to his representations the matter of his preaching was constantly the “New Divinity”—pressed on his hearers with the pungency of expression, extremity of statement, and polemical vehemence, which belonged to his natural temperament.

This period was brought to a close, and the greatest episode of Finney’s life inaugurated, by an unforeseen occurrence. He visited the Synod of Utica, of which he was a member, in October 1825,<sup>47</sup> and on beginning his return journey home was waylaid by G. W. Gale, his “theological teacher,” as he calls him here,<sup>48</sup> and induced to turn aside to preach at Western. Gale had been compelled by ill health to resign his charge at Adams in 1823, shortly before Finney left that place, and was now engaged on a farm at Western in laying the foundations of what was to be an eminently successful and indeed famous Manual Labor Institution, the parent of many less successful similar ventures. This preaching at Western broadened out into seven years (1825-1832) of probably the most spectacular revival activity the country has ever witnessed. That Finney felt himself to have taken a decisive step forward in entering upon this work,—to have advanced to a new stage in his career—may be indicated by his transferring his presbyterial membership from the presbytery of St. Lawrence to that of Oneida.<sup>49</sup> He had turned his back on frontier work: henceforth his labors lay in the towns and cities of this rich and populous region, with their established churches

<sup>47</sup> G. F. Wright, as cited, p. 46, erroneously says “October 1826.” Fowler, as cited, p. 202, says “the last of September, 1825.” Finney himself (*Memoirs* p. 140) says it was in October.

<sup>48</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 140.

<sup>49</sup> In the *Minutes of the General Assembly*, for 1825, Finney is listed as a W. C. of the Presbytery of St. Lawrence. In the *Minutes* for 1828, he is listed as a W. C. of the Presbytery of Oneida. These lists were at that time printed only every three years: there are none therefore for 1826 and 1827.

and organized religious activities,—and beyond. In his *Memoirs* he marks the transition by pausing to note that “at this place commenced that series of revivals, afterward called ‘The Western Revivals.’” Lyman Beecher calls them by the more designative name of “the Oneida denunciatory revivals.”<sup>50</sup> They may have owed the feature which won them this designation, and much else about them that brought them into disrepute, in part at least to the circumstance that they were an invasion of the backwoods into civilization. Here was this young man, but two years a minister, but four a Christian, with no traditions of refinement behind him, and no experience of preaching save as a frontier missionary, suddenly leading an assault upon the churches. He was naturally extravagant in his assertions, imperious and harsh in his bearing, relying more on harrowing men’s feelings than on melting them with tender appeal. “Force,” says the judicious observer whom we are here drawing upon—“force was his factor, and ‘breaking down’ his process.”<sup>51</sup> And in exercising this force he did not shrink from denunciations which bordered on the defamatory, or from the free use of language which can be characterized no otherwise than as coarse and irreverent.

All this was no doubt to be expected in the circumstances; and it was to be expected also no doubt that Finney should give himself of set purpose to stir up a commotion; and, having the assistance of a band of able coadjutors, that he should succeed in doing so to an incredible extent. The whole region was stricken with religious excitement, and nothing was permitted to stand in the way of fanning this excitement into ever hotter flames. Parishes were invaded without invitation, churches divided, opposing ministers “broken down,” or even driven from their pulpits, the people everywhere set and kept on edge. Finney was under no illusions as to the nature of this excitement or as to its dangers. He did not confound it with a movement of grace

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<sup>50</sup> *Autobiography*, Edited by Charles Beecher, vol. ii, p. 345.

<sup>51</sup> Fowler, as cited, p. 264.

It was only an instrument which he used to attract popular attention to the business he had in hand. It served him in other words as a means of "advance publicity." "It seems sometimes to be indispensable," he says,<sup>52</sup> that a high degree of excitement should prevail for a time, to arrest public and individual attention, and to draw people off from other pursuits to attend to the concerns of their souls." This function served, the excitement is so little of further value that it becomes noxious; it now draws the mind off from the religion to prepare the way for which it is invoked, and if it were long continued, "in the high degree in which it is often witnessed," it could end in nothing but insanity. Nevertheless Finney permitted himself to play with this fire; and it is a question whether his chief work in this region consisted in much else than in kindling it. Certainly the characteristic feature of these "Western Revivals" lies in the immensity of the religious excitement engendered by them; and it is matter of discussion until to-day whether their chief results are not summed up in this effect. That many souls were born again and became ultimately the support and stay of the churches of the region, nobody doubts. As little does anybody doubt that grave evils also resulted, the effects of which have been overcome only with difficulty and through the lapse of time. There is room for difference only in the relative estimate placed on these two opposite effects.

One reason why many were converted in these revivals was that there were very many to be converted; and the character of this large unconverted multitude accounts, no doubt, in part also for their accessibility to a revival of this type. The churches were in a depressed state and this meant both an abnormally low condition of Christian life within them, and an abnormally large mass of indifference or worse without them: an abnormal reaction was to be expected, and was indeed inevitable. Asa Mahan tells us,<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Views of Sanctification*, 1840, p. 19.

<sup>53</sup> *Autobiography*, 1881, p. 221.



that, observing these things, he had formed the distinct impression, before the revival came, that they must have a great and general revival of religion, or the churches would soon become extinct. "My reasons for this conviction," says he, "were two-fold: the general and embittered opposition to religion itself, and the appalling neglect of religious services, on the part of the unconverted, outside the churches, on the one hand; and the utter worldliness and indifference to the interests of souls and the cause of religion itself on the part of professors of Christianity, on the other." "No one," he adds, "not personally acquainted with the facts as they were can conceive how appalling these two aspects of the moral and religious state of the community then appeared." The harvest was ripe and waiting for the sickle. It must be borne in mind, also, that a very large proportion of those swept into the churches by the excitement of the revival were not really converted, as their subsequent history only too clearly proved. Joseph Ives Foot, writing in 1838, is constrained to say:<sup>54</sup> "During ten years hundreds and perhaps thousands were annually reported to be converted on all hands; but now it is admitted, that his (Finney's) real converts are comparatively few. It is declared even by himself that 'the great body of them are a disgrace to religion;' as a consequence of their defections, practical evils, great, terrible, and innumerable, are in various quarters rushing in on the Church."

It is very true that Finney could not conceal the instability of his converts from himself. Later he found a reason for it. It was because he had brought them only into traditional Christianity, and not into perfectionism. "While I inculcated the common views," he says,<sup>55</sup> meaning the common views as to an as yet imperfect sanctification, "I was often instrumental in bringing Christians under

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<sup>54</sup> *Literary and Theological Review*, March 1838, p. 39. For Foot see W. B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, vol. iv, 1858, pp. 669 ff., and the *Memoir* by his brother, George Foot, mentioned by Sprague.

<sup>55</sup> *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, ed. 1851, p. 619.



great conviction and into a state of temporary repentance and faith"—it is thus that he speaks of his entire evangelistic work up to 1836!—"but," he continues, "falling short of urging them up to a point where they would become so acquainted with Christ as to abide in Him, they would soon relapse again into their former state. I seldom saw, and can now understand that I had no reason to expect to see, under the instruction that I then gave, such a state of religious principle, understanding and confirmed walking with God, among Christians as I have seen since the change in my views and instructions." There lies in this passage an affecting acknowledgment of the failure of his early evangelistic labors to produce permanent results. One of the odd things connected with it, however, is that Finney fancies that, had he preached perfectionism, the effect might have been different—meaning that the perfectionism of his converts would have protected them from sinning. In point of fact, though he did not himself preach perfectionism, his preaching made perfectionists, as more than one witness testifies;<sup>56</sup> and his preaching of perfectionism could scarcely have done more than that. Yet the results were as we have seen. Jedediah Burchard roundly asserts that all revivals produce a crop of perfectionists, having in mind of course, the type of revival known to him. Finney does not go as far as that, but is willing to allow that revivals—again of course revivals such as he fomented—are commonly accompanied by a certain amount of what he would call fanaticism. In a tract written in his old age, called *Hindrances to Revivals*, he declares that he has sel-

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<sup>56</sup> Take for example the following words of Joseph I. Foot (*Literary and Theological Review*, March 1838, p. 70): "These doctrines with a corresponding system of measures were driven like a hurricane through the churches. . . . Hundreds and thousands . . . were led to believe themselves converted, and were immediately driven into the church. . . . Many of his (Finney's) spiritual progeny, under the abilities of his system [that is, under his teaching of a Pelagian ability of will], and the several influences which acted upon them, soon manifested their fatherhood [Pelagian] and declared themselves to be perfect. . . ."

dom seen a revival in which a bitter, denunciatory, fault-finding spirit did not make its appearance sooner or later, and that to a considerable extent. His account of this phenomenon is that when the Spirit of God is poured out on a people, Satan pours himself out on them too.

The phenomenon, however, will admit of another explanation, especially when we learn that in propagating these revivals everything was bent to the production of the excited state of feeling that was aimed at, and all ordinary Christian duties were in abeyance—absorbed in the one duty of exaltation of feeling. Thus, for example, Josephus Brockway<sup>57</sup> tells us that it was noted by all during the revival excitement at Troy in 1826-7, that the whole charitable work of the churches fell away and even the Sabbath Schools were neglected: all manifestations of Christian love stopped: there was nothing, he says, but “a machine put in motion by violence and carried on by power.” Even the Bible was thrust aside. “For a long time, during the high state of feeling,” he writes,<sup>58</sup> “(when, indeed, feeling was made a substitute for every Christian duty), the Bible must not be introduced at all, into any social meeting, from one month’s end to another. And while the exhortation was often reiterated, ‘Come, brethren, pray now, but don’t make any *cold* prayers,’ it was evidently held, although I do not say it was publicly expressed, that reading of the Bible was too cold a business for a Revival spirit. No time must be wasted in reading or singing, but the whole uninterruptedly devoted to praying with this faith and particularity, so vastly important.” We are witnessing here a sustained effort to push excited feeling on to the breaking point.

To the breaking point, of course, it came, all over the region which the revivals covered; and despite those who had been brought into a sure hope of eternal life—absolutely a large number, let us believe—the last stage of the region as such was worse than the first. It is the calm judgment

<sup>57</sup> *A Delineation of the Characteristic Features of a Revival of Religion in Troy in 1826 and 1827*, 1827, p. 47.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, p. 28.

of a man of affairs and of letters, seeking to put on record an observed social and religious phenomenon, which we have in the following statement of facts by the editor of the *New York Commercial Advertiser*:<sup>59</sup> "Look at the present condition of the churches of Western New York, which have become in truth 'a people scattered and peeled.' The time has not come to write the ecclesiastical history of the past ten years. And yet somebody should chronicle the facts now, lest in after times the truth, however correctly it may be preserved by tradition, should not be believed. . . . The writer entertains no doubt that many true conversions have occurred under the system to which he is referring. But as with the ground over which the lightning has gone, scorching and withering every green thing, years may pass away before the arid waste of the church will be grown over by the living herbage." If any corroboration of this testimony were needed, it would be supplied by that of the workers in these revivals themselves. James Boyle writes to Finney himself December 25, 1834:<sup>60</sup> "Let us look over the fields where you and others and myself have labored as revival ministers, and what is now their moral state? What was their state within three months after we left them? I have visited and revisited many of these fields, and groaned in spirit to see the sad, frigid, carnal, contentious state into which the churches had fallen—and fallen very soon after our first departure from among them." No more powerful testimony is borne, however, than that of Asa Mahan, who tells us—to put it briefly—that everyone who was concerned in these revivals suffered a sad subsequent lapse: the people were left like a dead coal which could not be reignited; the pastors were shorn of all their spiritual power; and the evangelists—"among them all," he says, "and I was personally acquainted with

<sup>59</sup> William L. Stone, *Matthias and His Impostures*, 1835, pp. 314 ff. The "system" to which Colonel Stone is referring is the revival system in practice in Western and Central New York. For Stone, see *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, *sub nom.*

<sup>60</sup> Cited in the *Literary and Theological Review*, March 1838, p. 66.



nearly every one of them,—I cannot recall a single man, brother Finney and Father Nash excepted, who did not after a few years lose his unction and become equally disqualified for the office of evangelist and that of pastor.”<sup>61</sup>

Thus the great “Western Revivals” ran out into disaster. Although it belongs to Finney’s earlier missionary labors it is a typical instance of their effects which Ebenezer Hazard Snowden gives us from his own parish. “Both Mr. Finney and Mr. Burchard,” he says, “made special efforts in Brownsville, where I was afterward settled. Mr. Wells, the pastor, who was before beloved by every man, woman and child, was as a result obliged to give up his charge about the time Mr. Finney was there. Such a course was pursued as exasperated a great portion of the respectable members of the congregation, and they immediately set up an Episcopal church which they have attended ever since.”<sup>62</sup> As a consequence of such occurrences Finney’s ministrations became no longer acceptable, and his preaching no longer effective in the very region in which he had once swayed men like a wind among the reeds. Over and over again, when he proposed to revisit one of the churches, delegations were sent him or other means used, to prevent what was thought of as an affliction. P. H. Fowler<sup>63</sup> quite uninten-

<sup>61</sup> *Autobiography*, 1881, pp. 227 f.

<sup>62</sup> *Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine*, May 1838, pp. 236 f. —Snowden adds about Burchard: “Mr. Burchard’s meeting there was equally disastrous in its results. He assumed the airs of a commander and would turn off about so many every day, and announce those to be converted. Some of those who thus became members never entered the church afterward. Some became perfectionists, and of the remainder, many were expelled. One of the elders remarked to me, that the church lost much of its vitality at that time.” Snowden, born in 1799, brought up in Oneida Co., graduated at Hamilton College, 1818, admitted to the bar at Utica, joined his father’s church at Sackett’s Harbor about the time Finney was joining the church at the neighboring town of Adams: he was pastor at Brownsville in 1836-7. See the *Biographical Catalogue of Princeton Theological Seminary*, 1909, *sub nom.* p. 56; and especially the *Necrological Report, presented to the Alumni Association, Princeton Theological Seminary, May 7, 1895*, 1895, pp. 294 f.

<sup>63</sup> As cited, p. 284.

tentionally supplies us with a pungent instance of the decay of Finney's acceptability as a preacher in this region, of which he was himself cognizant. Finney came back in 1855 to Rome, the scene of one of his greatest triumphs in 1826.<sup>64</sup> Now, however, his preaching elicited no response. He has himself told us of it,<sup>65</sup> and attributes what seemed to him the otherwise inexplicable coldness of his reception, to the fault of the pastor. This Fowler declares to have been very erroneous and very unjust. He himself ascribes it to a change in fashions in preaching. Finney preached, he says, just as he did in 1826, with the same ability, earnestness, force. But this kind of preaching was *passé*—and "his old friends in Utica, where considerable religious interest existed, deemed it unwise to invite him there." This kind of preaching was not *passé*, however, in other regions. It was still capable of oppressing men's souls elsewhere. But not again here—even after a generation had passed by these burnt children had no liking for the fire.

The offence of Finney's preaching attached both to its manner and to its matter; and it attached not to his preaching only but to his whole manner of conducting revivals, and not to his person only but to the whole bevy of assistants who gathered around him in prosecuting them.<sup>65a</sup> It be-

<sup>64</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 159.

<sup>65</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 434.

<sup>65a</sup> Marquis L. Worden, (in J. Hepworth Dixon's *Spiritual Wives*, vol. ii, p. 82) tells us who some of these were: "Revivals prevailed in the neighborhood and region about Manlius, and through the country, in which the New Measure Evangelists, such as Luther Myrick, Horatio Foote, and James Boyle led the way." How Foote preached we shall let Josephus Brockway (*A Delineation*, etc., 1827, pp. 57 f.) tell us. He is speaking of his preaching in the Troy revivals, 1826-7. "I went to Mr. Foote, a would-be minister, who was no small occasion of offence and dispute, nor ought I, perhaps, to be delicate in saying, he was no improper object of contempt. He preached what some called a sermon, in which he attempted to show that no man could get to heaven without living a perfect life. I went to him with objections to his sermon, showing them to Elder Cushman as I went. One of his positions was, 'That man's hope ain't worth a groat that isn't founded on obedience.'—To which I objected, that man's hope is good for nothing that is not founded on the merits of

longed to the movement itself and constituted its characteristic. We have seen Lyman Beecher using the epithet "denunciatory" in describing these revivals, and it may provisionally serve as well as another word to intimate their peculiarity. It was as if the day of judgment had come and the instruments of vengeance were abroad, with whips of scorpions, lashing the people into the Kingdom of God. Everywhere, naturally, there was wailing and gnashing of teeth. The denunciation indulged in was constant and unmeasured. It was not confined to the preaching: denunciatory praying was practiced as diligently as denunciatory preaching. Diverted from their ostensible purpose as petitions to the Almighty, prayers were employed merely as means of exciting the audience. Sometimes the effect aimed at can only be characterized as direct hysteria. At others, usurping the place of preaching, the prayer became an assault on the hearer; and that not merely with a more or less general reference, but, under the protection of the form of petition, with a particularizing of the precise individual intended and a detailed description of his faults, which would scarcely have been tolerated in preaching.

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Christ, and evinced by obedience. Another of his statements was, 'Sinners never can be saved, and whoever has preached that sinners can be saved, has preached what is not true.' To which I objected that Christ came to save sinners, and there was none in our world to be saved, but sinners. . . ." Foote's teaching is of course just Pelagian Perfectionalism in its purity—and it was preached in the Troy revival as part of its official presentation. Finney has the grace, it is true, to be a little ashamed of it; but he will not repudiate it. "In the midst of the revival," he writes in his *Memoirs*, (p. 204), "it became necessary that I should leave Troy for a week or two, and visit my friends at Whitesboro. While I was gone, Rev. Horatio Foote was invited by Dr. Beman to preach. I do not know how often he preached; but this I recollect, that he gave great offence to the disaffected members of the church. He bore down upon them with the most scorching discourses, so I learned." He wishes to roll the responsibility of inviting Foote over on Beman: but he himself endorses him. Foote appears in the *Minutes of the General Assembly* from 1825, when he is a Licentiate of the Presbytery of Cayuga, to 1854, when he is a stated supply at Redford and resides at Ripley, Ohio. He disappears from the *Minutes* without ever having held a settled pastorate.



People were "prayed at" rather than "prayed for," with the mind obviously set more on moving them than on moving God.<sup>66</sup>

We are observing here only one item in a system of practices which formed the characteristic feature of these revivals, and which soon came to be known collectively as "the new measures."<sup>67</sup> These "new measures" of course were much spoken against; but all opposition to them was sternly stamped out. There was no more highly esteemed minister in this region than William Raymond Weeks, who was at the time serving the Congregationalist Church at Paris Hill.<sup>68</sup> A Pastoral Letter issued by the ministers of the Oneida Association of which he was a member, warning the members of the churches under its care against the new practices, was composed by him;<sup>69</sup> and naturally also, in writing to his friends in the east, he expressed with some decision (for that belonged to his character) his opinion of the evils he saw being thus thrust upon the people. As a

<sup>66</sup> Asahel Nettleton (*Letters of the Rev. Dr. Beecher and Rev. Mr. Nettleton on the "New Measures" in conducting Revivals of Religion*, 1828, p. 35) gives the following as the substance of what had been communicated to him on this subject by men on the ground. "There are various errors in the mode of conducting revivals in this region, which ought to be distinctly pointed out. That on the prayer of faith. The talking to God as a man talks to his neighbor is truly shocking—telling the Lord a long story about A. or B., and apparently with no other intent than to produce a kind of stage effect upon the individual in question, or upon the audience generally. This mouthing of words, these deep and hollow tones, all indicate that the person is speaking into the ears of man and not of God. I say nothing of the petitions often presented; but the awful irreverence of the manner!"—On the "particularity" used with reference to individuals in public prayer, see Brockway, as cited, p. 22 ff.

<sup>67</sup> Sprague, *Annals* etc., vol. iv, pp. 473 f.: "His situation was now rendered very unpleasant by the introduction of what were technically called the 'new measures' in connection with revivals of religion: and he therefore removed. . . ."

<sup>68</sup> Biographical notice in W. B. Sprague, *Annals*, etc. vol. iv, pp. 473 ff.; P. H. Fowler, as cited, pp. 673 ff., 85, 261, 274; *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, *sub nom.*

<sup>69</sup> *Pastoral Letter of the Ministers of the Oneida Association to the Churches under their care, on the Subject of Revivals of Religion*. 1827.

result not only was he driven in the end out of his pulpit, but his memory has been sedulously defamed ever since. Fifty years after, Finney was still speaking with undeserved contempt of him,<sup>70</sup> and he and Henry Davis,<sup>71</sup> President at the time of Hamilton College—whose crime also was “opposition to the revivals”—seem to be the only ones among the multitude of ministers who have worked in Central New York discussed by P. H. Fowler in his history, whom he has dealt with with obvious injustice. The Pastoral Letter which was the head and front of Weeks’ offending, is not only a perfectly inoffensive but an eminently judicious document, expressed in entirely temperate language. It is absolutely free from personalities, and equally free from rasping particularizing. Framed in general terms, it merely enumerates the kinds of practices, which may possibly be met with in revivals of religion, that lovers of God and their own souls would do well to avoid. It might be read through without divining that it was directed against any particular movement: and one would suppose that its serious and quiet cautions would be accepted by all as an excellent road-book for the wayfarer through a troubled land. That the participants in “the Western Revivals” were quick to declare that their own portrait was depicted may cause us some surprise; and more, that their resentment was occasioned not by their looking upon the portrait drawn as a caricature of them, but by the painter’s intimation that he himself considered it ugly. We clearly have, in this calm enumeration of things to be avoided in revivals, a trustworthy outline sketch of how “the Western Revivals” were being carried on.

The phrase “new measures” soon however, acquired a sense of rather narrower compass, in which it embraced only those of the new practices which might be conceived as means employed to produce the effect sought.<sup>72</sup> As these

<sup>70</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 144.

<sup>71</sup> Biographical notice in Sprague, as cited, p. 244 ff.; Fowler, as cited, pp. 505 ff.; Appleton, as cited, *sub nom.*

<sup>72</sup> Besides the *Pastoral Letter of the Oneida Association* and the

came to be more fully known, they astonished, distressed, appalled the friends of revivals everywhere; and most of all, as was natural, those who felt themselves to stand in particularly close connection with the churches of Central New York—such as the clergy of Connecticut. Asahel Nettleton, the most esteemed “revival minister” of the day, took the lead in an effort to abate the evil.<sup>73</sup> Others—notably Lyman Beecher,<sup>74</sup>—joined themselves to him. Many—Griffin, Porter, Nott, Tucker, Cornelius—visited Troy where Finney was then holding revival services, that they might observe “the new measures” for themselves. They came away more shocked than before. Letters were written.<sup>75</sup> And finally a conference was arranged—“the New Lebanon Convention,” held July 18-26, 1827—in which the “Eastern brethren” endeavored to bring their “Western brethren” to reason.<sup>76</sup> The attempt was in vain;

*Letters of Drs. Beecher and Nettleton*, consult on “the New Measures” especially: Andrew Reed and James Matheson; *A Narrative of a Visit to the American Churches by the Deputation from the Congregational Union of England and Wales*, 1835, vol. II, pp. i, ff. (by Reed); C. Hodge, *Biblical Repertory and Theological Review*, Oct. 1825, pp. 601-607; Albert B. Dod, *Ibid*, pp. 626-674; and J. W. Nevin, *The Anxious Bench*, 1843. Finney tells us (*Memoirs*, p. 288) that he made little or no use of “the Anxious Seat” until the Rochester Revivals of 1831. G. F. Wright (pp. 100 ff.), while properly recognizing its use as falling in with Finney’s dogmatic scheme, errs in supposing that the opposition to it turned on a notion in the minds of Finney’s opponents that “there was little natural connection between the means used for the persuasion of men and their conversion.” A simple reading of their discussions will show that their objections turned on quite other considerations.

<sup>73</sup> See Bennet Tyler, *Memoir of the Life and Character of Rev. Asahel Nettleton, D.D.*, 1844, chapter xii, (p. 248-270), “His opposition to the new measures.”

<sup>74</sup> See *Autobiography*, edited by his son, Charles Beecher, 1865, vol. ii, ch. 12: “New Measures,” pp. 89-108.

<sup>75</sup> See especially, *Letters of the Rev. Dr. Beecher and the Rev. Mr. Nettleton, on the “New Measures” in conducting Revivals of Religion; with a Review of a Sermon by Novanglus*, 1828.

<sup>76</sup> Finney gives an account of the New Lebanon Convention from his point of view in the sixteenth chapter of his *Memoirs* (pp. 202 ff.); G. F. Wright devotes to it a chapter in his *Life of Finney* (pp. 39 ff). It will be found described from their point of view in the *Lives of Nettleton and Beecher*, as referred to above.



and the fundamental reason why it was in vain is not difficult to discern. The axe was not laid to the root of the tree. The "new measures" were not arbitrary practices due to nothing but a coarse and depraved taste, the correction of which might be easily managed and need work no great change in principle. They belonged to the very essence of the revival as conceived by its promoters. It was in them that its heart expressed itself. They were in a word the natural and inevitable effect of the doctrine on which the revival was based. For what was new in this revival was not merely the particular "measures" by which it was prosecuted—that might be a merely surface phenomenon—but the particular doctrine on which it was founded, of which the measures employed were only the manifestation. This was a Pelagian revival. That was its peculiarity: and everything else connected with it was merely the expression of this.

That it was "the new measures" rather than the Pelagianism of the "Western Revivals" which in the first instance at least offended the Eastern brethren is no doubt due in part to the general fact that it is always external things which first meet the eye. The external things in this instance were shocking in themselves; and their rooting in a doctrinal cause was often felt but vaguely or not at all. Pelagianizing modes of thought, derived from the same general source from which Finney had himself drunk—the "New Divinity" taught at New Haven,—were moreover widely diffused among the New England clergy themselves. Men of this type of thinking might be offended by Finney's practices on general grounds, but could scarcely be expected, for that very reason, to assign them as to their cause to a doctrine common to his and their own thinking. And that the more that there were as yet no adequate means of ascertaining what the doctrinal basis of Finney's preaching was. Only his actual hearers were in any real sense informed of his teaching. When a little later he began to publish lectures and sermons the scales fell from men's

eyes. The discerning had no difficulty then in seeing the correlation between his practices and his doctrines, or in clearly understanding that the phenomena of his revivals which gave most offence were merely the natural consequences of the fundamental fact that they were Pelagian revivals.

Accordingly Albert B. Dod is found writing:<sup>77</sup> "We recollect that it was matter of surprise to many, when the conjunction took place between the coarse, bustling fanaticism of the New Measures and the refined intellectual abstractions of the New Divinity. It was a union between Mars and Minerva,—unnatural and boding no good to the church. But our readers will have observed that there is a close and logical connection between Mr. Finney's theology and his measures. The demand created for the one by the other and the mutual assistance which they render are so evident, that we will spend no time in the explanation of them." And Charles Hodge:<sup>78</sup> "That the new measures and the new divinity should have formed an intimate alliance can surprise no one aware of their natural affinity. . . . No better method could be devised to secure the adoption of the new doctrines than the introduction of the new measures. The attempt has accordingly been made. The cold, Pelagian system of the new divinity has been attached to the engine of fanaticism." These writers, it will be observed, do not assert that such practices as are summed up in the "new measures" may not exist—have not existed—apart from a determinate Pelagian system: what they affirm is that it is in such practices that a Pelagian system naturally expresses itself if it seeks to become aggressively evangelistic, and that in them we may perceive the Pelagian system running out into its appropriate methods. Joseph Ives Foot describes Finney's revivals therefore frankly from this point of view.<sup>79</sup> "These doctrines, with a correspond-

<sup>77</sup> *The Biblical Repertory and Theological Review*, October 1835, p. 656.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, p. 614.

<sup>79</sup> *The Literary and Theological Review*, March 1838, p. 70, article

ing system of measures, were driven like a hurricane through the churches. To resist this operation was to resist God. Conscientious Christians gave place till they should see what it was. Timorous ones were attached to his triumphal car, while the bold and the ignorant seized the reins and the whip; and hundreds and thousands under these various influences, were led to believe themselves converted and were immediately driven into the church. These services were called revivals; and thus the very name of the operations of divine grace was brought under suspicion." It is from the same point of view that Charles D. Pigeon writes with a somewhat broader reference:<sup>80</sup> "We look upon the course of Mr. Finney as particularly instructive. He of all others has taught the New Haven theology in its greatest purity and has ventured to push the principle to its legitimate results. Those parts of New York which have been the scene of his labors are giving and will long continue to give the most instructive lessons as to the nature of that system of doctrine and its influence on individual character and religious institutions." And it is still from the same point of view that Samuel J. Baird places at the head of the very instructive chapter in which he gives an account of "the Western Revivals" the descriptive title of "Practical Pelagianism," and brings the chapter to a close with these words:<sup>81</sup> "Such were the fruits, widely realized in Western New York, from the New Haven theology. They were its legitimate and proper results. The good taste, common sense and piety of many of the disciples of that school may revolt from these exhibitions, and pause before adopting them in their full development. But the practical system of Finney, Burchard, Myrick and their compeers was deduced from the theology of New Haven, by a logic which no ingenuity can evade."

It will not have escaped observation that the writers we entitled, "Influence of Pelagianism on the Theological Course of Rev. C. G. Finney, developed in his Sermons and Lectures."

<sup>80</sup> *The Literary and Theological Review*, March 1838, p. 70.

<sup>81</sup> *A History of the New School*, 1868, pp. 217-234.



have last quoted assume that "the Western Revivals" were already generally understood to have been far from successful, as judged by their ultimate fruits. That indeed was the case. We have already seen that Finney himself came in the end to a recognition of this unhappy fact. It will cause no surprise that he should become wearied with this unfruitful work. Already in 1832 he was looking back upon this portion of his career as a closed page of doubtful success, and was consciously seeking a new phase of activity. He was yet to do a great deal of evangelistic work; but, although he threw the circle of his labors wider and wider, even across the seas, he thought of himself as no longer an evangelist—he had become a pastor.<sup>82</sup> His own account of the change is as follows.<sup>83</sup> "I had become fatigued, as I had labored about ten years as an evangelist, without anything more than a few days or weeks of rest during the whole period. . . . We had three children, and I could not well take my family with me, while laboring as an evangelist. My strength, too, had become a good deal exhausted; and on praying and looking the matter over, I concluded that I would accept the call from the Second Free Church and labor, for a time at least, in New York." By this action Finney became a part of a movement then making in the Presbyterian churches of New York to reach the people by the establishment of "free" churches, that is, churches with no pew-rentals and otherwise adapted to attract and hold the unchurched masses.<sup>83a</sup> In this way he gave to his pastorate a genuinely evangelistic character.

The church over which he was settled was a Presbyterian church, and Finney had always been a Presbyterian. It was in the Presbyterian Church that he was converted, licensed,

<sup>82</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 94: "I have been a pastor now for many years, ever since 1832." How completely Finney felt he had broken with his past we have already seen (above p. 3 and note 4).

<sup>83</sup> Pp. 318 f.

<sup>83a</sup> An interesting "History of the Free Churches in the City of New York," by one of the prime movers in their establishment, Louis Tappan, may be read in the appendix to Reed and Matheson's *Narrative of a Visit to the American Churches*, etc. 1835, Vol. II, 341-353.

ordained; it was under its authorization that he had pursued his whole work as an evangelist, and the region in which he had pursued his chief revivalistic enterprises was a distinctively Presbyterian region: and now he was settled as pastor over a Presbyterian church. But Finney was nothing less than a Presbyterian. The church of which he was pastor—as were all the Free Presbyterian Churches—was under the care of the Third Presbytery of New York, an “elective-affinity” Presbytery, as little Presbyterian as anything could be which was willing to bear the name. Still, there was friction over matters of discipline and the like; and Finney felt uncomfortable in his harness. His friends accordingly built a new church for him—the “Broadway Tabernacle”—which they organized as a Congregationalist church. Of this church he took charge in the autumn of 1834. He did not take his dismissal from the Presbytery, however, until the spring of 1836, after he had been at Oberlin for a year, and was on the point of returning thither for his second session.<sup>84</sup> What led him thus tardily to sever his connection with a church with which he had so little in common we can only conjecture. Perhaps the process of writing his theological lectures at Oberlin quickened his consciousness both as to the significance of matters of faith in church relations and as to the complete dissonance of his own beliefs with those of the Presbyterian Church of which he was still an accredited teacher.

He had not been left without pointed reminders of the falseness of the position which he occupied. So soon as his *Sermons on Various Subjects* (1834) and *Lectures on Re-*

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<sup>84</sup> The records of the Third Presbytery of New York concerning Finney's case tell that, “on the 14th of February 1832 the Second Free Church (Chatham Street Chapel), composed chiefly of members from the First Free Church, was organized, and on the 28th of September the Rev. Charles G. Finney was installed pastor. . . . On the 2d of March, 1836, Dr. Finney was released” (S. D. Alexander, *The Presbytery of New York, 1738 to 1888*, 1887, p. 107). This Second Free Church became a Congregationalist Church June 13, 1836, and Asa Mahan tells us (*Autobiography*, pp. 227) that Finney's immediate successor in the pulpit made shipwreck of his faith.

*revivals of Religion* (1835) had been published this had become glaring and created an open scandal. He was called upon publicly to withdraw from a church in which he was so patently out of place. Albert B. Dod, for example, in July 1835, closes his review of his *Sermons* with an expression of thanks to him "for the substantial service he has done the church" in them, "by exposing the naked deformity of the New Divinity," and then adds: "He can render her still another service, and in rendering it perform only his plain duty, by leaving her communion and finding one within which he can preach and publish his opinions without making war upon the standards in which he has solemnly professed his faith."<sup>85</sup> In closing, in the following October, his review of the *Lectures on Revivals*, Dod returns to the subject and insists on Finney's duty to leave the church. "It is an instructive illustration of the fact that fanaticism debilitates the conscience," he now says,<sup>86</sup> "that this man can doubt the piety of any one who uses coffee, and call him a *cheat* who sends a letter to another, on his own business, without paying the postage, when he remains, apparently without remorse, with the sin of broken vows upon him. In this position we leave him before the public. Nor will we withdraw our charges against him, until he goes out from among us, for he is not of us." We know nothing, of course, of the effect of such challenges on Finney's action; but it is to be noted that he withdrew from the Church immediately (within six months) after they were made. Perhaps it should be added as illustrating the lightness with which Finney regarded the obligations of his doctrinal professions, that, according to his own account, he had originally incurred those obligations without informing himself of what he was committing himself to. In describing his licensure,<sup>87</sup> he records: "Unexpectedly to myself they asked me if I received the confession of faith of the Presbyterian church. I had not examined it,—that is, the large work containing

<sup>85</sup> *Biblical Repertory and Theological Review*, July 1835, p. 527.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, October 1835, p. 674.

<sup>87</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 51.



the catechism and confession. This had made no part of my study. I replied that I received it for substance of doctrine, so far as I understood it. But I spoke in a way that plainly implied, I think, that I did not pretend to know much about it. However, I answered honestly, as I understood it at the time." Amid the curiously interlaced qualifications and explanations of this statement, it only emerges that Finney was not unaware of the character of his action. Under its cover, he for a dozen years flouted the doctrines he had been placed by it under obligation to propagate.

During all these dozen years Finney had been a wanderer on the face of the earth, doing the work of an evangelist. Even during the four years of his stay in New York, he did not stay in New York. He had accepted the pastorate offered to him there as a means toward securing a more settled mode of existence; and in impaired health and depression of spirits he was obviously still longing for peace and a quiet life. It was in this mood that the proposal to go to Oberlin found him; and it was in this mood that he accepted it. He was in the prime of life, and the event shows that his amazing vigor was unimpaired. His real career was indeed just opening before him; forty years remained to him in which he was "Oberlin's central spiritual force and most eminent representative."<sup>88</sup> The pulpit, the lecture hall, the press, were now the instruments with which he wrought, and with all alike he wrought with the hand of a master-workman. It is possible, to be sure, to exaggerate here. "In intellectual insight into the deepest realities of religion, in originality of treatment and in logical power,"

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<sup>88</sup> D. L. Leonard, *The Story of Oberlin*, 1898, p. 60, cf. p. 278 f.: "Beyond comparison his was the chief personal force upon the colonial tract. The pulpit was the throne from which Sunday after Sunday, for more than a generation, he swayed vast audiences. . . . For forty years his lectures on theology were given, and in addition, 1852-1858, he filled the chair of intellectual and moral philosophy. For fifteen years, 1851-1865, he was Oberlin's executive head. . . . Through his sermons, lectures and letters published in *The (Oberlin) Evangelist*, and elsewhere, a vast influence was wielded. Some of his books sold literally by the hundred thousand."

writes Albert Temple Swing,<sup>89</sup> "President Finney is to be ranked side by side with Edwards: they are the two greatest American theologians." This is only one of those provincial judgments which Oliver Wendell Holmes satirizes when he says that every village has, somewhere on its lawns, the biggest tree in the world. We must manage to see over the rim of the dell within the limits of which our experiences are wrought out. But certainly it must be recognized that Finney was "the greatest mind and the regulating force in the development of Oberlin theology."<sup>90</sup> He was blessed with coadjutors of a high order of talent. But it was to him that, above all others, Oberlin owed the measure of greatness which it achieved.

The contrast between the pictures of the religious conditions obtaining in Central and Western New York during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, received from the accounts which Finney and Asa Mahan respectively give of their early years, is nothing less than startling. The two lives ran on very closely parallel lines. Both men spent their early boyhood in Oneida County—in hamlets only a few miles distant from one another. The later youth of both was passed in the wilder West. Yet the religious conditions in which the two grew up are described by them very differently. All the religious advantages which Finney represents himself as lacking, Mahan represents himself as possessing. He was born and bred in a pious household, and surrounded on all sides by religious influences. His father, to be sure, was not, in his son's judgment at least, a thoroughly consecrated man. But his mother was a deeply religious woman with an aura of devoutness hanging always about her. It was a Bible-reading, praying family, in which the religious books that to Finney were inaccessible lay always at hand. The Church was at the door, and the ministrations of the sanctuary were constantly enjoyed: if there was formal preaching only an alternate Sabbaths,

<sup>89</sup> *The Bibliotheca Sacra*, July, 1901, p. 480 f.

<sup>90</sup> Frank Hugh Foster, *A Genetic History of the New England Theology*, 1907, p. 453.

service was held every Sabbath; and when sermons were not preached by ministers, they were read by laymen. The house was the resort of itinerant ministers, and the whole neighborhood was full of Christian people ready to give Christian succor. One rubs his eyes and wonders if this can be the same country-side in which Finney found little that pretended to be religious, and nothing that pretended to be religious that was not also absurd. To such an extent, it seems, does varying personality color the aspect of surroundings, and even by a process of selection mould them into harmony with itself.

Mahan was a few years Finney's junior, and, although he found his way into the ministry at a somewhat younger age than Finney, he had had a shorter—and a far less stirring and notable—ministerial experience than Finney, when they came together at Oberlin. He was born November 9, 1799,<sup>91</sup> at Vernon, Oneida County, New York, a hamlet some sixteen miles west of Utica and about half that distance from Kirkland, Finney's boyhood home, with which it had easy communication over the famous "Genesee Turnpike."<sup>92</sup> Here he was bred in what he calls<sup>93</sup> " 'the strictest sect' of the Calvinistic faith," and was surrounded both in his home and in the church life into which he was carried as a matter of course, with constant religious influences. These had no more effect upon him, however, than that he grew up a boy of good habits and excellent character. When he was about twelve years of age the family removed to the West—to Orangeville, Wyoming County, four miles from Warren and some forty miles southwest of Rochester. The change of residence, however, brought no essential change

<sup>91</sup> So Mahan himself repeatedly says (e.g. *Out of Darkness into Light*, 1874, p. 1; *Autobiography*, 1881, p. 1). On the other hand the Encyclopaedias (*Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, *Johnson's Universal Cyclopaedia*, *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge*) uniformly give the date as 1800.

<sup>92</sup> For this turnpike and its significance see in O'Callaghan's *Documentary History of the State of New York*, vol. II, p. 1142, 1165 f. For the state of things west of Utica in 1792, see p. 1131.

<sup>93</sup> *Out of Darkness into Light*, p. 9.



in the boy's inner life or his external carriage. He lived in his new home, too, as a member of a religious household would be expected to live, taking part in all the religious activities of the community; but withal, he was still destitute of religious experiences of his own. He was known, however, as a young man of sterling character and irreproachable conduct. And so it came about, that when his own schooling was completed, he was "on account of his well-known attainments and moral reputation,"<sup>94</sup> "selected to teach school in one of the most Christian, moral and intelligent districts in all the region round." Here, when he had entered by a few months into his eighteenth year (1816), he was led during the progress of a revival, to give his heart to God.<sup>95</sup> His conversion, as he describes it, was as distinctively supernaturalistic as Finney's: "if not miraculous, yet altogether supernatural," is the somewhat odd phrase with which he describes it, drawing at the same time a parallel between it and that of Colonel Gardiner, understood by him to be the result of a miraculous intervention.<sup>96</sup> He represents himself<sup>97</sup> as praying that he 'might be kept from ever returning to that state of alienation from God in which his life had been spent' hitherto. And, "I had no sooner pronounced these words," he says, "when I was consciously encircled 'in the everlasting arms.'" This was a prayer for "perseverance" and it seems to be implied that it was granted and that a pledge was given him of its granting, in a tangible response.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>94</sup> *Out of Darkness into Light*, p. 28.

<sup>95</sup> P. 9.

<sup>96</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 50.

<sup>97</sup> *Out of Darkness into Light*, pp. 1-13.

<sup>98</sup> On p. 28 however he seems to assign his attainment of assurance of "perseverance" to a somewhat later, though apparently not greatly later, date: "At length I attained to a full assurance that I was not only then an accepted servant of Christ, but should have grace to continue such even unto the end. In this assurance I have done service for Christ up to this period. Not a stain of doubt rests upon my mind that I am His for eternity." On this basis he rejects the "moment by moment" teaching of most Higher Life teachers and declares that according to Scripture we are "to exercise present faith" both for "present" and for "future sanctification."

Whatever else may be said of this, it was not, any more than Finney's, a conversion according to the Pelagianizing prescriptions of the "New Divinity."

For some months after his conversion, Mahan tells us,<sup>99</sup> his "spiritual state was rather of a *negative* than *positive* character"; by which he appears to mean that his thoughts were rather on the privileges that his new relation to God had brought him than on service. That, however, was soon corrected; and he gave himself with diligence not only to prepare himself for the ministry but to improve his opportunities to bring souls to Christ. In consequence, not only did he have trophies to show, in the favorable situation in which he was at the time, but having removed for his next winter's teaching to a very ungodly neighborhood, he built up a church there of from thirty to fifty members.<sup>99a</sup> As years passed on, however, he lost the "inward peace and joy in God which his first love had induced,"<sup>100</sup> and passed into a condition which he speaks of as "twilight," and in which he continued for no less than eighteen years—in fact up to his discovery of "perfection" as the proper state of the Christian, at Oberlin, in 1836. "Twilight" is merely his name, accordingly, for the condition of the "ordinary Christian." He does not think of denying that this "semi-twilight of a semi-faith" is a "genuine form of Christian experience," as genuine a form of it as "the sunlight" itself.<sup>101</sup> In both states alike he had sin, and understood that every deliberate sin committed deserved death. But the two states were characterized by different "sentiments and expectations" with reference to sin.<sup>102</sup> In the one he expected to sin: in the other he had no expectation of sinning. And, he adds,<sup>103</sup> "in each, my experience fully accorded with my faith"—a sentence which contradictorily to the preceding

<sup>99</sup> P. 18.

<sup>99a</sup> P. 20.

<sup>100</sup> P. 90.

<sup>101</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 281; cf. *Out of Darkness into Light*, p. 98.

<sup>102</sup> P. 284.

<sup>103</sup> P. 285.

statement, seems to assert the enjoyment in the later state of actual "perfection." It was "in the twilight" then that he lived out his life up to his great experience at Oberlin. He soon set his heart, however, on the ministry and began active preparation for it. There were two years of preparatory study; then four years at Hamilton College from which he was graduated in 1824; and then three years at Andover Seminary, from which he was graduated in 1827. Henry Davis was President of Hamilton College during his time; at Andover he came under the instruction of Leonard Woods and Moses Stuart—from the latter of whom he learned at least how to deal with the seventh chapter of Romans so that it would interpose no obstacle to his later theories. He paints the general conditions at Andover in almost as dark colors as John Humphrey Noyes does a few years later. He does not hint at any improprieties of conduct: "There was nothing morally impure about it." But he found no great spirituality: "Never was I in an atmosphere less morally and spiritually vitalizing than that which encircled me during those three years."<sup>104</sup>

Leaving Andover, he became a candidate under the charge of the Presbytery of Oneida, occupying himself meanwhile in "agencies and miscellaneous ministerial duties," as he puts it.<sup>105</sup> Soon, however, he found himself back in the West, and "commenced work in the city of Rochester, with the expectation of organizing a new church there."<sup>106</sup> "Just as the organization was being effected," however, he "was suddenly stricken down by an attack of inflammatory rheumatism in both knees and ankles and his left wrist." He was taken to his father's house in Orangeville, ("where," says he, "my youth had been spent"); but even in his illness he could not be idle. He found the church there in a most deplorable state.<sup>107</sup> He

<sup>104</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 144.

<sup>105</sup> P. 155.

<sup>106</sup> P. 167.

<sup>107</sup> This was probably in 1828. The church at Orangeville after a period of vacancy had enjoyed the service of a Stated Supply in 1826,



caused himself to be carried to it Sunday after Sunday in a chair, and preached from the chair "for about three months." The result was a revival in which he had the happiness of seeing his own father brought to Christ. "Among the converts was my aged father. He had professed religion from my childhood, but was manifestly a total stranger to the grace of God."<sup>108</sup> When he was able to undertake regular work again, he became "pastor-elect of the Congregational church at Pittsford, near Rochester,"<sup>109</sup> and duly appears in the Minutes of the General Assembly for 1830 as a member of the Presbytery of Rochester and pastor at Pittsford.<sup>110</sup> His tenure of this charge was, however, very brief. He had already left it in time to be reported to the General Assembly of 1831 as without charge; and by August 1831 he had removed to Cincinnati to take the oversight of a new venture, called then the Sixth Presbyterian Church, but soon afterward to become the Vine Street Congregationalist Church. He "commenced his labors with this church," he tells us,<sup>111</sup> "on August 29th, 1831 and resigned May 1, 1835"—serving it therefore somewhat less than four years. The church consisted at the beginning of only sixteen members "who lived in the city and worshipped with us"; but towards the end of his stay with it, it was largely increased: seventy-four were added on examination in 1834, and in the course of eight months' time upwards of a hundred. Throughout the whole period of Mahan's stay with it, it worshiped in a hired hall, "and," he adds, "a

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and was vacant again in 1827 and 1828, obtaining a Stated Supply in 1829 (*General Assembly Minutes*, pp. 63, 182, 284, 460).

<sup>108</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 168.

<sup>109</sup> Pittsford, Monroe Co., N. Y., eight miles southeast of Rochester.

<sup>110</sup> His record in the *Minutes* runs thus: 1829 (his first appearance), candidate of the Presbytery of Oneida: 1830, pastor at Pittsford, Presbytery of Rochester; 1831, W. C. Presbytery of Rochester; 1832, S. S. Sixth Church at Cincinnati; 1833, W. C. of the Presbytery of Cincinnati (the Sixth church vacant); 1834, S. S. Sixth Church, to which are assigned 134 members—the only statistics of the church's membership in the entries; 1835, Asa Mahan's name no longer appears, and Herman Norton is given as pastor of the Sixth Church.

<sup>111</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 163.

very plain one at that." He was never really settled over it as its pastor, and even his service to it as "stated supply" does not seem to have been uninterrupted.<sup>112</sup>

These details have been recited in order that the extent and nature of Mahan's ministerial experience before going to Oberlin in 1835 may be estimated. From his graduation at Andover in 1827 to his arrival at Oberlin some eight years had elapsed, but little more than half of these had been spent in the actual care of a church, and for barely a single year had he sustained the office of pastor. In determining the value of his experiences, such work as he did at Rochester in gathering together the nucleus of a church, and at Orangeville in leading a revival movement, must not be underestimated. Immediately on settling in Cincinnati, also, he was elected a Trustee and a member of the Prudential Board of Lane Seminary, and this brought him into active participation in the broader work of the church; and indeed thrust him at once into the focus of the most hotly debated national question of the day—that which concerned slavery. With it all it must be said, however, that his ministerial experience had been exceedingly small and very narrow.

Meanwhile he had not maintained intact the faith in which he was bred. That was, he tells us—speaking of course from the New England point of view,<sup>113</sup>—"the straitest sect' of the Calvinistic faith." From the very beginning of his personal religious life, however, this hereditary Calvinism had begun to crumble. Of the imputation of Adam's sin,<sup>114</sup> he declares that "subsequently to his conversion, he never for a moment entertained that sentiment"; and he adds<sup>115</sup> that he "quite early" adopted the "universal atonement."<sup>116</sup> In a broader statement, he informs us that

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<sup>112</sup> In the *Minutes* of 1833 Mahan is listed as without charge and the church as vacant.

<sup>113</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 320.

<sup>114</sup> P. 199.

<sup>115</sup> P. 200.

<sup>116</sup> In later life he distinguished between *three* opinions on the ex-

from the commencement of his ministry he "rejected the Old School and Hopkinsian theories, and adopted and became a zealous advocate of that of divine efficiency." Perhaps his drift had not gone much further than this when he went to Oberlin. His going to Oberlin marks, however, the beginning of a completer revolution in his faith, a revolution which he represents, in a statement which defines it by the widest limits, as carrying him "from the extreme bounds of Calvinism"—that is the way he expressed the faith in which he had been bred—"to the quite opposite pole of the evangelical faith"—which is his description of his ultimate point of view.<sup>117</sup> This ultimate point of view he describes again as "the antipodes of all the peculiarities of the Calvinistic faith."<sup>118</sup> His mind here is chiefly on the question of liberty and ability, and, accordingly, he expresses elsewhere the revolution in faith which he suffered as "changing fundamentally his life-long and fondly cherished beliefs, and repudiating utterly the doctrine of necessity and adopting that of liberty."<sup>119</sup> What he means is that he rejected the whole conception of natural and moral inability and adopted in its stead a doctrine of plenary ability;<sup>120</sup> or, to put it more sharply, that he now took up with the notion that obligation is limited by ability, a notion which, he rightly says, compelled an entire reconstruction of his theology.<sup>121</sup> It seems to be clear

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tent of the Atonement, e.g., *Christian Perfection* (1839) p. 26 f.:—(1) *Limited* Atonement, "Christ died for a part only of the human race—the elect," (2) *General* Atonement,—“Christ died for no individuals of our race in particular, but for all in general,” (3) *Special* atonement, “Christ died for everyone in particular”—so much for each that it might seem to him that it was for him alone that he died. It is the third that Mahan makes his own. But he modified it so as to escape universal salvation by saying that although Christ died for each, he avails only for those who accept him. We do not get the full flavor of this fervent individualism of Christ's death until we recall that the theory of atonement held is the Rectoral!

<sup>117</sup> *Autobiography*, p. viii.

<sup>118</sup> P. 320.

<sup>119</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 204.

<sup>120</sup> Pp. 203-4.

<sup>121</sup> P. 214.



enough that this fundamental step was already taken before going to Oberlin; so that he began his work there, like Finney and his other colleagues, as a zealous preacher of the "New Divinity." There is no reason to doubt therefore the accuracy of James H. Fairchild's representation,<sup>122</sup> that all the "founders" of Oberlin, including John J. Shepherd, and not only Finney, but Mahan and Morgan and Cowles, held to "New School views," in the sense that they insisted upon "the doctrine of human ability." "These men," he says, and obviously very truly, "were all earnest preachers of human ability, and the personal, voluntary responsibility of the sinner for everything about him that can be reckoned as sin."

It is Fairchild also who reminds us<sup>123</sup> that the gathering of a body of such men as these in a place like Oberlin, necessarily concentrated the immense personal power which they represented, specifically on the cultivation of the spiritual life. Out in the wide world their energies had been intensely directed to the conversion of sinners: here, in this narrow sphere, where "there was only here and there a sinner to be converted," they were naturally diverted to the perfecting of the saints. Men were set to the intensive cultivation of their Christian life; and the preachers pressed upon them with all the insistence that had been employed in the whirlwind revivals from which they had come, the duties of examining themselves whether they were in Christ and of immediate completion of their entire consecration to His service. "It was not a rare thing," says Fairchild, "for a large portion of the congregation, after a searching sermon by Prof. Finney or Pres. Mahan, to rise up in acknowledgment that they had reason to apprehend that they were deceived as to their Christian character; and to express their determination not to rest until their feet were established upon the Rock." It is almost incredible that the preachers did not realize from the beginning that what they were demanding from their hearers was sheer perfection;

<sup>122</sup> *The Congregational Quarterly*, April 1876, p. 237.

<sup>123</sup> As cited, p. 238.

and that what they were preaching was mere perfectionism. Perfection was men's duty, and all that was duty was practicable—for obligation and ability are co-extensive. But we must remember that these were somewhat reckless men, who made it a virtue not to count costs; and who were accustomed to tear every passion to tatters and to lash every dawning emotion into excesses with unmeasured invective; pursuing their conceived ends without regard to the inevitable consequences of the means employed. There is no reason why we should not believe them when they tell us that they were unaware that they were demanding perfection of their hearers as an achievable duty, until their eyes were opened to it by their hearers themselves. One of the odd circumstances connected with the situation was that Finney and Mahan knew perfectly well what perfectionism was. They had lived with it in Central and Western New York: their companions in their evangelistic work there had preached it in their presence: their followers had often rushed headlong into it. They themselves had kept their skirts free from it; partly, no doubt, because of their engrossment with the prior matter of conversion; more, no doubt, because of the mystical and antinomian form taken by "the New York Perfectionism," which was abhorrent to them as preachers of righteousness. But they could not help knowing that perfectionism lay at their door; and yet they drove on, preaching an essential perfectionism without, they say, being aware of it.

Perfectionism lay at their door even in the literal, physical sense. Oberlin was not so isolated as to be insensible to what was going on in Central and Western New York, or even in its own immediate neighborhood, in the Western Reserve of Ohio. Its settlers were recruited from the class in which "New York Perfectionism" was prevalent; and they did not shed their memories or break off their lines of communication when they came to Oberlin. The students of theology, to whom the appeals of the preachers were most frequently addressed, were themselves the products—Mahan

says the best products—of “The Western Revivals,” and could not fail to be familiar with their constant accompaniments. Even if we lacked direct evidence of contact, therefore, we could not assume that Oberlin perfectionism arose wholly apart from connection with the wide-spread perfectionist movement which preceded it. In point of fact direct evidence is not lacking. We know that, in the quarters in which perfectionist tendencies first showed themselves at Oberlin, not only was the earlier movement known, but the Putney literature was read and an impulse derived from it to repeat the experiences described in it. It served, for instance, “to raise the question of obligation as to the degree of holiness which Christians might obtain,”<sup>124</sup> in the summer of 1836 (the second session of the Theological Seminary), for a body of young men associated in a missionary society and earnestly engaged upon their spiritual culture in preparation for their prospective work. They rejected with decision the antinomian features of the teaching they found in this literature; but, under its influence, they advanced, along the lines of the “New Divinity” common to it and themselves, to a full conviction of the duty and possibility of completely putting away sin. A fervid consecration meeting was held by them, in which they solemnly bound themselves not to grieve their Master by any further sinning. “They left the meeting”—so one of their number records,<sup>125</sup>—“feeling that they were pledged to a life of entire obedience, chiefly from the side of duty—the obligation and the possibility of it.” Very naturally, and very truly, a report went around that “the missionary society had all become Perfectionists.” We gather that the step they had taken met, for the moment, with but imperfect—certainly not with universal—sympathy, although it was the only logical outcome of the searching preaching to which they were listening day by day. It was a straw, however, showing which way the wind was blowing; and by the time

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<sup>124</sup> Fairchild, as cited, pp. 238-239.

<sup>125</sup> We are quoting from D. L. Leonard, *The Story of Oberlin*, p. 238.



the session then in progress ended, the wind was blowing a gale.

The preaching itself was growing ever more fervid and insistent. Mahan represents himself as burdened in spirit over the low state of Christian living, and earnestly seeking light on the great problem of Christian attainment. One day, he visited one of his associates, and they together sought guidance in the Word. The conversation turned on the passage, "The love of Christ constraineth us." "While thus employed,"<sup>126</sup> he says, "my heart leaped up in ecstasy indescribable, with the exclamation, 'I have found it.'" What he had found was that Christ is all in all. "All in all; for in Him is to be had not merely our justification, but also our sanctification: the one is as truly a gift of grace, as exclusively a work of God, as the other, and is to be had on the same condition."<sup>127</sup> "The highway of holiness was now for the first time distinct in my mind . . . ." We may perhaps express what he found in the two words, "Jesus only." In Him, he perceived, we obtain all we need; and we must go to Him for it all, and receive it all by a direct act of faith. He had known hitherto what to do when a sinner asked, What shall I do to be saved? He would say, Go to Christ in faith. But he had not known that precisely the same answer is to be given to the believer who wishes to be delivered from his low plane of living. He had been accustomed to instruct such "to confess their sins, put them away, renew their purpose of obedience, and go forward with a fixed resolution to do the entire will of God."<sup>128</sup> He now saw that that was "a fundamental mistake." We are not only to be justified by the faith of Christ; but to be sanctified also by 'the faith that is in Him.'" We cannot be justified by faith, and be sanctified by "resolves": "we must cease wholly from man and from ourselves, and trust Christ universally." Along with this new light on Christ as all in all, he now saw also the necessity

<sup>126</sup> *Christian Perfection* (1839) ed. 7, 1844, pp. 181 ff.

<sup>127</sup> *Autobiography*, pp. 322 f.

<sup>128</sup> *Out of Darkness into Light*, p. 140.

of the work of the Spirit. And he considers it remarkable that "the doctrine of Christ as our 'wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption' and the 'promise of the Spirit,' as the great central truth of the Gospel," should have been presented to his mind at one and the same time."<sup>129</sup> Of course, however, they necessarily go together because they are only two aspects of the supernaturalness of salvation.

For exactly what happened to Mahan in this great experience—this experience which he always looked back upon as pivotal for his life,—was the rediscovery of the supernaturalness of salvation. In this aspect of it, it was a reaction from the emphasis which, as a preacher of the "New Divinity," he had been placing on "ability," and a return to what he calls "universal" dependence on the grace of Christ. He says himself<sup>130</sup> that the teaching stands in contrast with his talk, "in his ignorance," of "human ability to do all that is required of us," and with the consequent "trust he had put in his own resolutions." This seems a confession that in teaching according to the formulas of the "New Divinity" he had been walking in a Pelagian path: and, so far as there was now a reaction from that bad way of thinking, he had turned his face to the light, and ceasing from self-sufficiency had put his dependence in God. This reaction, most commendable in itself, was nevertheless, as actually experienced by him, at once insufficient and excessive. He still reserved faith entirely to man; he wished to exclude human effort only from the walk in Christ. And like all Christians of his class he could not conceive of truly concursive activities. He operated with an unconditioned either—or: either works or grace; either effort or trust. As he had formerly allowed no place for faith in sanctification, so now he did not wish to allow any place for effort in sanctification. He seems not to be able to understand that we must both "work and pray," as the popular maxim puts it;

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<sup>129</sup> P. 147.

<sup>130</sup> P. 141.

both believe and labor; he wishes us to "cast all the responsibility" on Christ after a fashion which smacks more of mysticism than the Gospel.<sup>181</sup> Meanwhile the reader is filled with amazement that this discovery of the supernaturalness of salvation should have seemed something new to Mahan. Bred in "the straitest sect" of Calvinism," did he have to wait for this moment to learn that Christ is all in all; that in Him we have by faith all that we can need; that He is made to us sanctification as well as justification—yes, all that is included in redemption?

Naturally this great discovery did not remain inoperative in Mahan's life. In the act of so learning Christ, he so experienced Christ,—and this constituted his "second conversion," in which he seemed to himself to rise into a higher plane of Christian living, and passed, as he loves to express it, from "twilight" into the full light of Christian experience. It is interesting to observe, as he explicitly tells us, that when he communicated his new experience to Finney, it found a ready welcome with him, and was repeated in his experience. "When my associate, then Professor Finney," he relates in one characteristic account,<sup>182</sup> "became aware of the great truth that, by being 'baptized with the Holy Ghost,' we can 'be filled with all the fulness of God,' he of course sought that baptism with all his heart and soul, and very soon obtained what he sought." Finney also received therefore at this time "the second blessing"; and not Finney only; the doctrine, the experience, was contagious. Of course it was carried at once also into the preaching and gave it an added insistence, an increased ardor. These men and their preaching—whatever they or it had been before—now became definitely perfectionist, though that was not

<sup>181</sup> In his *Autobiography*, pp. 286 ff., he tells us that the great difference between the two points of view which had been successive in his life turned on sanctification. In the one justification is held to be by faith, while sanctification is by hard labor; in the other both justification and sanctification are purely of faith, both are wrought by God alone and when we claim either by faith—"our responsibility is at an end."

<sup>182</sup> *Out of Darkness into Light*, p. 180.



yet recognized. Mahan explains their position by the use of the contrasting adverbs "theoretically" and "practically."<sup>133</sup> They had become "practically" perfectionists, he says, but not yet "theoretically" so. By this he does not seem to mean here primarily that they had become perfect and did not yet know it—although it is not clear that that too does not lie in his meaning—but that they had adopted and were preaching perfectionist doctrine, but had not yet come to see clearly that this was what they had done. The way he expresses it at large is this: "The redemption of Christ was then presented to my mind as full and perfect redemption. I felt that in Christ I was 'complete,' that in Him every demand of my being was met, and perfectly met. In this light I presented Him to others." But it was only "by subsequent reflection that I became aware that the principles which I had practically adopted necessarily involved the doctrine of Christian perfection." We are not now concerned with the defects of Mahan's logical processes. The discovery of the supernaturalness of salvation does not involve exclusion of the consumption of time in the realization of all that is included in it. But we have now merely to note that this was not perceived; and accordingly what Mahan and his colleagues had come to believe and were now fervidly preaching was the possibility and duty of the immediate enjoyment of all that Christ had bought for His people, at least in the spiritual sphere, without remainder. That is perfectionism.

With the leaven of perfectionism already working among the students and preaching of this character proceeding with ever increasing insistence, the end might easily have been foreseen. During the autumn of 1836 a series of revival meetings were held at Oberlin, by which the whole community, citizens and students, was profoundly moved. At most of these Mahan was the preacher; and at one of them, held just after the close of the academic session, he preached a powerful sermon, enforcing with great urgency

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<sup>133</sup> *Biblical Repertory*, October 1840, p. 425-6.

the topic now always in his heart and on his lips, the duty of a higher consecration. A young man in the audience, just graduated from the theological department,—Serenio Wright Streeter was his name,<sup>134</sup>—rose and asked with solemn earnestness that his religious instructors, Finney and Mahan, would tell him plainly to what extent he might hope to be delivered from sinning; whether he could expect to receive really entire sanctification on faith. "When we look to Christ for sanctification," he asked,<sup>135</sup> "what degree of sanctification may we expect from Him? May we look to Him to be sanctified wholly or not?" "I do not recollect that I was ever so shocked and confounded at any question before or since," says Mahan.<sup>136</sup> "I felt for the moment that the work of Christ among us would be marred, and the mass of minds around us rush into Perfectionism." An answer, definite and decided, could not be avoided; but it could be postponed—especially as the end of the session had arrived which brought with it the time for the scattering of both teachers and taught. No answer was attempted, therefore, at the moment, but a promise was given that the matter would be carefully canvassed and an answer returned in due season.

Thus the Oberlin teachers were compelled fairly to face the question of Perfectionism. They gave themselves diligently to its solution. Finney was accustomed at this time to spend the winter—vacation-time at Oberlin—in New York, preaching in the "Broadway Tabernacle." On this occasion Mahan accompanied him. They explored the Scriptures together; and, says Mahan,<sup>137</sup> "after looking carefully at

<sup>134</sup> See *General Catalogue of Oberlin Seminary*, 1898, *sub nom.* He was graduated with the first theological class that was graduated and ordained at Oberlin October 10, 1836.

<sup>135</sup> Mahan, *Christian Perfection*, p. 188. The exact form of the question is given differently in the various reports, but the substance always remains the same. Cf. Mahan's *Autobiography*, p. 323; Fairchild, as cited, pp. 239 f.; Wright, *Life of Finney*, p. 204; Leonard, as cited, pp. 236 ff.

<sup>136</sup> *Christian Perfection*, p. 188.

<sup>137</sup> *Christian Perfection*, p. 189.

the testimony of Scripture, in respect to the provisions and promises of divine grace, we were constrained to admit, that but one answer to the above question could be given from the Bible; and the greatest wonder to me is, that I have been a 'master of Israel' and have never before 'known these things.' " But they did not confine themselves to the appeal to Scripture. They sought guidance also from those who had been perfectionists before them. It was naturally on the Methodists that their glance was first cast and lingered longest—for were not the Methodists the type of evangelical perfectionists? Finney found their idea of sanctification unacceptable, because it seemed to him "to relate almost entirely to states of sensibility," and he elsewhere<sup>138</sup> declares with decision that their notion that less is required of us under the Gospel than was required under the law is inadmissible. Nevertheless, he pronounced Wesley's *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*—the acquaintance of which he made at this time—though marred by some expressions (he thinks merely expressions) to which he should object, "an admirable book," which he wishes every member of his church would read.<sup>139</sup> By the side of Wesley's *Christian Perfection* he places the *Memoirs of James Brainerd Taylor*—which he also hopes "every Christian will get and study." He had read the most of it he says, "three times within a few months." This same collocation of Wesley and Taylor meets us also incidentally in a passage of Mahan's: he speaks of "such men as John Wesley and James B. Taylor, who believed that by the grace of Christ applied to 'cleanse them from all sin,' they had 'been made perfect in love.' "

What is odd about this is that it was just these two books which John Humphrey Noyes read in the autumn of 1834—two years earlier—when he was making his way also to perfectionism. And Finney repeats the same gossip which Noyes repeats, to the effect that Taylor's biographers

<sup>138</sup> *Memoirs*, p. 340.

<sup>139</sup> *Lectures to Professing Christians*, ed. 1880, pp. 358 f.



had suppressed the most perfectionistic passages in his letters. We have seen that perfectionism did not show itself among the students of Oberlin apart from influences derived from the earlier perfectionism of New York, or apart specifically from the teachings of J. H. Noyes. It was much more a matter of course that Finney and Mahan did not arrive at their perfectionism in ignorance of these prior movements. We are scarcely prepared, however, for the emphasis which they seem to place on their knowledge of them; or for what seems very much like a tendency to apologize in part at least for them. "I have read their publications," says Finney,<sup>140</sup> "I have had some knowledge of them as individuals." He cannot give assent to "many of their views"; he repudiates the imputation to him of their "peculiarities;" especially he turns with reprobation from their "antinomianism." But he adds at once that they are not all antinomians,—“some of their leading men” are not; and although “there are still a number of important points of difference between them and the orthodox church,” the points of agreement are very numerous.<sup>141</sup> Similarly Mahan sees in all the perfectionist movements of the recent past a divine preparation for what was to come in them; and adopting them, along with the Methodists, as their own, adds:<sup>142</sup> “Some outside the Methodist denomination had ‘entered into rest’ before we did.” It is not merely misery that loves company; and the desire to discover precedents is ordinarily strong enough to lead us to take them where we can find them. It is meanwhile clear enough that Finney’s and Mahan’s sense of solidarity with perfectionists as such was strong. It was strongest, of course, with the Methodists, from whom they derived most—among other things the terms by which they expressed their new doctrine. “The terms by which we designate it,” says Mahan,<sup>143</sup> “were those by which it had been presented since the times of

<sup>140</sup> P. 346.

<sup>141</sup> *Views of Sanctification*, 1840, pp. 134 ff.

<sup>142</sup> *Out of Darkness into Light*, 1875, p. 195.

<sup>143</sup> *Autobiography*, p. 367.

Wesley and Fletcher, namely, Christian Perfection, Entire Sanctification, and Full Salvation." The *thing* expressed by these terms they would not admit they got from the Methodists. What they offered they got direct from the Scriptures,—though this affirmation naturally can be overpressed. "I gave myself earnestly," says Finney,<sup>144</sup> "to search the Scriptures and to read whatever came to hand upon the subject, until my mind was satisfied that an altogether higher and more stable form of Christian life was attainable and was the privilege of the Christian. . . . I was satisfied that the doctrine of sanctification in this life, and entire sanctification, in the sense that it was the privilege of Christians to live without known sin, was a doctrine taught in the Bible, and that abundant means are provided for the securing of that attainment." The doctrine thus described as derived from the Scriptures has in any case somewhat close affinities with the Methodist doctrine.<sup>145</sup>

No sooner was the Oberlin doctrine of perfection conceived than it was published. Finney was the first to publish it. He was in New York during the winter months of 1836-1837 for the purpose of preaching in the "Broadway Tabernacle." Preoccupied with the subject of the Christian walk, he delivered to his congregation a series of *Lectures to Professing Christians*, which were printed as they were delivered in the *New York Evangelist*, and soon afterward (1837) were gathered into a volume.<sup>146</sup> Two of these lectures were devoted to the subject of "Christian Perfection." In this first exposition of Oberlin perfectionism there are naturally seen lying in the background all the characteristic traits of Finney's theological thinking.

<sup>144</sup> *Memoirs*, pp. 340 f.

<sup>145</sup> The Methodist books were very diligently read, not only the fundamental treatises of Wesley and Fletcher, but such biographies as those of Hester Ann Rogers and William Carvosso (cf. J. S. Fairchild, *The Congregational Quarterly*, April 1876, p. 242); and the Methodist commentators—particularly Adam Clarke—were very much deferred to (cf. Finney, *Views of Sanctification*). Along with them the support of other perfectionists like Robert Barclay, was welcomed.

<sup>146</sup> *Lectures to Professing Christians* (1837) Oberlin, 1880.

All virtue consists in disinterested benevolence; nothing is sinful but voluntary action; we have no obligation beyond our ability—we can do all that we ought to do, and what, for any reason whatever, we cannot do, we no longer, in any sense whatever, ought to do: it is such conceptions as these which form the substructure. On this basis a perfectionism is developed which already bears the fundamental character that ever afterwards marked the Oberlin doctrine. What is taught is a perfection that consists in complete righteousness, but in righteousness which is adjusted to fluctuating ability. Enoch Pond, in reviewing the lectures, rejoices to find that the perfection taught—in contrast with the Wesleyan doctrine of a so-called “evangelical perfection”—requires the perfect fulfilment of the law of God.<sup>147</sup> But, as W. E. Boardman—discriminating later the “Oberlinian” from the Wesleyan doctrine—points out, what is really distinctive of “Oberlinian” perfection is the “view of the claims of the law as graduated to the sinner’s ability.”<sup>148</sup> This teaching is already here. But the more fundamental idea that perfection is the fulfilment of the law is more dwelt upon. The lectures are thus given the aspect of insisting on perfect righteousness, and point is given to this insistence by an open polemic against the Wesleyan conception. “No part of the obligation of the law is discharged,” it is said:<sup>149</sup> “the Gospel holds those under it to the same holiness as those under the law.” The definition of Christian Perfection is given crisply as “perfect obedience to the law of God;” and this is explained as requiring that “we should do neither more nor less than the law of God prescribes.” “This,” it is added,<sup>150</sup> “is being, morally, just as perfect as God.”

When Finney undertakes to show that this perfection is attainable in this life, his argument runs on the familiar

<sup>147</sup> *The Biblical Repository*, January 1839, pp. 44 ff.

<sup>148</sup> *The Higher Christian Life*, 1859, p. 41.

<sup>149</sup> P. 342.

<sup>150</sup> P. 341.



lines.<sup>151</sup> He pleads that God wills our perfection; that all the promises and prophecies of God respecting our sanctification have perfect sanctification in view; that this is the great blessing promised throughout the Bible; and the very object for which the Holy Spirit is given. Every one of these propositions is true; and none of them is to the point. The whole point at issue concerns the process by which the believer is made perfect; or perhaps we would better say, whether it is by a process that he is made perfect. Avoiding the hinge of the argument, Finney endeavors to impale his readers on dilemmas. "If it is not a practicable duty to be perfectly holy in this world, then it will follow that the devil has so completely accomplished his design of corrupting mankind, that Jesus Christ is at fault, and has no way to sanctify His people but by taking them out of the world." "If perfect sanctification is not attainable in this world it must be either from a want of motives in the Gospel, or a want of sufficient power in the Spirit of God." It would be a poor reader indeed who did not perceive at once that such dilemmas could be applied equally to every evil with which man is afflicted—disease, death, the uncompleted salvation of the world. If it is not a practicable thing to be perfectly well in this world, then Jesus Christ has been vanquished by the Devil and has no way to make His people well except by taking them out of the world. If freedom from death is not attainable in this world, then it must be due to want of sufficient power in the Spirit of God. If the world does not become at once the pure Kingdom of God in which only righteousness dwells, then we must infer either a want of sufficient motives in the Gospel or a want of sufficient power in the Son of God. There have been people who reasoned thus: the point of interest now is, that it was not otherwise that Finney reasoned—and that accounts for many things besides his perfectionism. It is a simple matter of fact that the effects of redemption, in the individual and in the world at large, are realized, not

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<sup>151</sup> Pp. 346 ff.

all at once, but through a long process: and that their complete enjoyment lies only "at the end."

A certain lack of logical coherence is discernable in other features of these lectures also. Finney was too good a Pelagian readily to homologate Quietistic conceptions: it is not for the Pelagian to say, "Cast thy dreadful doing down:" doing is with him rather the beginning, and middle, and end of all things. Yet we have already seen Mahan imbuing him with his newly-found notion (borrowed ultimately from the Wesleyans) that sanctification is to be attained immediately by an act of faith, and indeed also with his mystical Quietistic explanation of how this sanctification is brought about by faith. We noted at the time that it was interesting to observe this, and the interest seems to us to be enhanced when we observe the doctrine enunciated—so far as it is enunciated—in the context of these lectures. Finney the Pelagian denies that Christ in His Spirit can work on man otherwise than by bringing motives to action to bear on him—in a word by persuading him himself to act. Whatever man does, then, in the way of obeying the law—perfect obedience to which constitutes his perfection—he must himself do: it cannot be done for him or in him or through him by another; no other can affect him otherwise than by presenting motives to action to him. We should like to know then exactly what Finney means when he rebukes those who seek sanctification "by their own resolutions and works, their feelings and prayers, their endeavors and activity, instead of taking right hold of Christ by faith, for sanctification, as they do for justification."<sup>152</sup> What he says is that we may—must—attain to sanctification—or, as entire sanctification is meant, to perfection, that perfection which is perfect obedience to the law of God—immediately by an act of faith, without any resolution or effort on our part to obey the law, or apparently, any activity on our part in obeying it. "Faith," he says, "will bring Christ right into the soul and fill it with the

<sup>152</sup> P. 362.

same spirit"—note the small s—"that breathes through Himself." We greatly wonder how "faith" does all this, and note only that it is faith that does it, not Christ: Christ supplies only the model to which faith conforms us. For light on this dark question, however, we shall have to go elsewhere.

Finney's inconcinity is not occasional merely but constant. Take another instance.<sup>153</sup> He is arguing that the power of habit need not inhibit perfection, since it does not inhibit conversion. The power of habit is a thing that may be overcome. As he argues this point, however, he raises in our minds a previous question—the question whether God can save at all. The answer he supplies is Yes, sometimes; and sometimes, no—at least "consistently with His wisdom," a phrase which does not vacate but only locates His inability. Of man in his natural state we must recognize, he says, that "selfishness has the entire control of the mind, and the habits of sin are wholly unbroken." And this condition of course presents an obstacle to salvation—an obstacle, he says, "so great, in all cases, that no power but that of the Holy Ghost can overcome it." It is indeed, he adds, "so great in many instances, that God Himself cannot, consistently with His wisdom, use the means necessary to convert the soul." Men then, it seems, may be so set in their wickedness that no "power"—the term is misleading; God uses no power in the transaction except the power of persuasion—which God, being wise, is willing to use upon them will avail for their salvation. Finney says this is the actual case "in many instances." These men, clearly, then, are unsalvable. God, so long as he remains the wise God, cannot save men so sunk in sin. We have thus reached the astonishing conclusion that men may be too sinful to be saved. They are saved, or they are not saved, according to their determination in sin. Moderately sinful souls can be saved, very sinful souls are beyond the possibilities of salvation. This no doubt is good Pelagian doctrine: it is

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<sup>153</sup> P. 283.



not Paul's doctrine or Christ's. We are surprised to find it here where Finney had started out to prove that evil habits cannot inhibit the attainment of perfection, because they do not inhibit the attainment of conversion. We have ended by proving that "in many instances" they can and do inhibit the attainment of conversion; and that, whether we are converted or not does not depend therefore on God who in many cases is helpless in the face of our sinfulness, but on the degree of our sinfulness.

In his *Lectures on Systematic Theology*,<sup>154</sup> Finney makes the following remarks concerning the lectures we have been considering. "These lectures were soon spread before thousands of readers. Whatever was thought of them, I heard not a word of objection from any quarter. If any was made, it did not, to my recollection, come to my knowledge." He is often inexact in his historical statements; and perhaps we should not wonder that he is inexact here too. In point of fact the lectures received the normal attention of reviewers; and it is difficult to believe that the strictures made on them were not at the time brought to the author's attention. *The Christian Spectator*, the organ of Finney's own party, gives them, it is true, only passing mention. But this passing mention is not without its significance. Its object is apparently to read Finney a lecture, as the *enfant terrible* of the "New Divinity" party, and to serve notice on him that he was expected to keep within the bounds and to content himself with repeating the shibboleths appointed for him. "On the subject of *Christian Perfection*" we read,<sup>155</sup> "we think Mr. Finney is not always sufficiently guarded, and though we do not believe he means anything more than we should fully admit,—the possibility and duty of obedience to God in all things commanded—yet we fear he may be liable to misconstruction and injure the consciences of many weak but pious persons." The note of irritation here is unmistakable: in the sequence of

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<sup>154</sup> Ed. 1, vol. ii, 1847, p. 170; ed. 2, 1851, p. 571.

<sup>155</sup> *Christian Spectator*, June 1837, p. 342.

obligation, ability, actualization, could not Finney, like the rest of them, be satisfied with the first two without pushing on inconsiderately to the third? So far then from there having been no word of objection to the teaching of the lectures spoken from any quarter, they were objected to from all quarters. And, naturally, the reviewers "from the other side" did not content themselves with passing mention but subjected them to reasoned criticism. This was done, for example, by Joseph Ives Foot in a trenchant article in the *Literary and Theological Review*,<sup>156</sup> which was given the uncompromising title of "Influence of Pelagianism on the Theological Course of Rev. C. G. Finney, developed in his Sermons and Lectures." It was done also by Enoch Pond in a prudent article published in *The Biblical Repository*.<sup>157</sup> And although it was not done in a subsequent article on current works on Perfectionism published in the same journal by N. S. Folsom,<sup>158</sup> it was made plain that that was only because the writer considered that it had been already sufficiently done by Pond. Pond as a good New Englander goes so far with Finney that he is glad to allow "the attainableness" of perfection by the Christian, or, as he phrases it, "its metaphysical attainableness;" but like the *Christian Spectator* he wishes to stop right there and deny that it is ever "attained actually." On the ground of the current New England doctrine, which postulated "natural ability" for all that can be required, the whole question reduced itself thus for him to one of mere fact, and he argues it on that understanding.

Princeton.

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<sup>156</sup> March 1838, pp. 38 ff. See particularly pp. 52 ff.

<sup>157</sup> January 1839, pp. 44 ff.

<sup>158</sup> July 1839, p. 143.







